

“I DON'T TAKE KINDLY TO YOUR INVASION OF THIS FINE GAMING CULTURE”:
GENDER, EMOTION, AND POWER IN DIGITAL GAMING SPACES AS
DEMONSTRATED THROUGH DEAD ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

Radhika Gajjala, Advisor

My dissertation focuses on intersections of gender, power, and emotion in different digital spaces, specifically video game-related spaces. I'm predominantly concerned with ways in which gender operates in the video gaming subculture in such a way that it can elicit a range of strong emotions that are often skirted or even neglected in academic studies of the medium. My primary focus is on a triangulation of visual and qualitative content analysis with participant observation to examine the different ways in which power and emotion manifest around the female body. Two of these areas include the different ways players, viewers, audiences, whatever one would call a person who comes into contact with the visual components of a video game, interact with playable- and non-playable video game characters. Additionally, I focus on digital non-gaming space interactions, such as those in discussion boards or popular media article comment sections. The entire dissertation is structured from a critical feminist perspective and uses the video game *Dead Island* (2011) as an anchor to ground the discussion.

To all the feminist gaming scholars who came before me.

And those to come.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER I – AND AWAY WE GO: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction and Background.....	1
Introductory Literature Review	8
Basic Intersections of Feminism and Media	8
“The Digital Locker Room” and Patterns in Video Game Lit	10
This Dissertation.....	16
CHAPTER II – THEORETICAL GROUNDING.....	20
Introduction.....	20
Cultural Studies Foundation	21
Feminist Foundation	25
Feminist Media Studies.....	35
Emotion and/or Affect, or What?	39
Digital Culture and Visual Culture Studies	40
Digital Culture	40
Visual Culture Studies.....	42
The Next Chapter	43
CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION.....	45
Introduction.....	45
What is Feminist Methodology?.....	46
Note on autoethnography	48
Triangulation of methods.....	52

	vii
Note on mixed methods vs multiple methods.....	52
Triangulation of feminist multiple methods research.....	54
Primary Text.....	55
Offline vs. Online Data	58
Note on fieldwork in digital spaces	59
Chapter IV: Case Study I Methodology	61
Evolution of Method – Visual Cultural Analysis	61
Site.....	64
Artifact contextualization	64
Procedure.....	66
Chapter V: Case Study II Methodology	68
Qualitative Content Analysis.....	69
Ethnography – Participant Observation	72
Site.....	75
Procedure.....	78
Case study coding frame.....	80
Online ethnographic influence	80
Concept-driven coding from previous research and theory.....	81
My coding frame	82
The Next Two Chapters.....	83
CHAPTER IV – THE IMPORTANCE OF IMMERSION THROUGH FIRSTHAND CRITICAL, FEMINIST VIDEOGAME PLAYING FOR VISUAL ANALYSIS WITHIN GAMING STUDIES.....	84

	viii
Introduction.....	84
Video Game Content Literature Review.....	87
VG-Literature Analyzing Print Media.....	88
VG-Literature Analyzing Digital Content.....	91
VG-Literature Analyzing Gameplay.....	93
Relevant Race and Media Related Literature	97
Analysis and Preliminary Discussion.....	100
Game Opening.....	100
Individual Characters	101
Skills and specialties.....	103
Problematic Purna.....	105
In-Game Play: Appearance and Dialogue.....	108
In-Game Play: Questlines.....	111
Final Observations.....	112
Chapter-Specific Limitations	113
CHAPTER V – MY SIDE, YOUR SIDE, MY SIDE, YOUR SIDE: QUALITATIVE	
CONTENT ANALYSIS AND ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY OF GAMING SPACE	
COMMENTARY.....	114
Introduction.....	114
Online Space Related Literature Review.....	121
Comment Analysis as Digital Culture Method.....	122
Affect and emotion in comment sections	122
Incivility in political comment sections.....	124

Digital extensions of the public sphere.....	125
Habermas' Public Sphere and Fraser's Subaltern Counter-Publics.....	127
Gaming and the public sphere.....	129
Gaming-Related Studies of Online Commenting	132
#GamerGate: Or, My God,	
#ICan'tBelievethisHappenedWhileWritingmyDissertation.....	133
Analysis and Discussion	136
Frozen Statements.....	138
Well-Being Posts	139
Defensive Statements.....	142
Antagonism or Confrontation.....	144
Conclusion.....	146
Chapter-Specific Limitations	147
CHAPTER VI – OPENING UP, BEFORE POWERING DOWN: WEAVING	
AUTHOETHNOGRAPHY INTO A DISSERTATION CONCLUSION	149
Introduction.....	149
Primary Conclusions.....	152
Case Study 1 – Immersed in <i>Dead Island</i>	152
Theoretical influence – the male gaze	154
Case Study 2 – Wading Through Commentary.....	156
Addressing my research concerns: Sexist and misogynistic commentary	
.....	156

Addressing my research concerns: Gamer interaction in online non-gaming settings.....	158
Addressing my theoretical influence: The digital public sphere and counterpublics	159
Limitations.....	160
Future Directions.....	161
REFERENCES.....	164
APPENDIX A – <i>DEAD ISLAND</i> CUTSCENE CITATIONS.....	186
APPENDIX B – SITES USED FOR ANALYSIS.....	188
APPENDIX C – CODING FRAME.....	190
APPENDIX D – HSRB CONSENT FORM	191

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	Princess Toadstool, Super Mario Bros. 2	2
2	Lara Croft, composite art	2
3	<i>Dead Island</i> original edition cover-art.....	55
4	<i>Dead Island: Riptide</i> – Zombie Bait Special Edition promotional image.....	57
5	<i>Dead Island</i> game logo	84
6	The four main protagonists	102
7	Purna’s “Skill Tree” from in-game play	105
8	Purna’s caretaking in action.....	107
9	Purna’s Original concept art	108
10	Promotional art for each of the four main protagonists.....	108
11	In-game image of Purna from early in <i>Dead Island</i> game play	109
12	In-game still of Xian Mei.....	110
13	Screen capture of internet search for “feminist gamer online harassment”	117
14	Xian Mei’s art composite.....	154
15	Purna’s art composite	154
16	An infected female <i>Dead Island</i> NPC	155

CHAPTER I – AND AWAY WE GO: INTRODUCTION

Y'see, one of the issues of male privilege as it applies to fandom is the instinctive defensive reaction to any criticism that maybe, just maybe, shit's a little fucked up, yo. Nobody wants to acknowledge that a one-sided (and one-dimensional) portrayal of women is the dominant paradigm in gaming; the vast majority of female characters are sexual objects. If a girl wants to see herself represented in video games, she better get used to the idea of being the prize at the bottom of the cereal box. If she wants to see herself as a main character, then it's time to get ready for a parade of candyfloss costumes where nipple slips are only prevented by violating the laws of physics. The number of games with competent female protagonists who wear more than the Victoria's Secret Angels are few and far between. (O'Malley, 2011, para 17)

Introduction and Background

Feminist theory has intersected with popular culture, particularly popular media (e.g., Halberstam, 2012; McRobbie, 2009), in many ways. One medium in particular, the video game (or the gaming industry), has tangentially come up in conversation, but not been heavily investigated until the early 2000s. There are many reasons why this could be true: video games are still in their toddler years as far as media are concerned (with video game console popularity really only picking up in the late-1980s to mid-1990s) and the gaming industry is often seen as generating somewhat of a 'low brow' pastime and may not have garnered a large enough following in academic feminist theorist circles to warrant serious study – especially when television, film, and the music industry still provide so many areas in need of serious feminist inquiry.¹ Whatever the case may be, the gaming industry is now booming and an increased desire to study the potential audience impact of mediated video game portrayals and participation in gaming culture is rising as well. For me, one of the more interesting ways of looking at the gaming industry is the way in which it intersects with gender, power, and digital culture, at large. In this dissertation, I will examine the ways in which gender and power intersect within the video

¹ I strictly mean circles within academia here – there have been plenty of pop media writers willing to discuss video games.

game ‘world’, with subsequent implications for digital culture more generally, mainly through an attempt to understand the emotional reactions of gamers in an anchored context. Thus it is important to anchor my voice in this conversation, and to explain why this type of research appeals to me on such a personal, feminist level.

The way video game creators gender their male and female characters has always been a

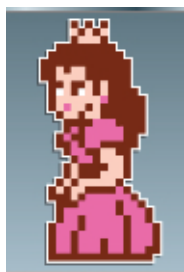


Figure 1. Princess Toadstool, Super Mario Bros. 2. This was the first playable Princess character in the series history.

fascination of mine, beginning with my Princess Toadstool (later to be renamed Princess Peach) and Lara Croft days of the mid-1990s. Princess Toadstool (See Figure 1), of Nintendo’s Super Mario infamy, was a playable character first in Super Mario Brothers 2 in 1994, and the only non-villain female playable character in all

of the original Nintendo series, though she represents the iconic “damsel in

distress” for the company (GameFAQs). Lara Croft

(See Figure 2), of Sony Playstation’s Tomb Raider, was

the main character of the popular adventure series first

released in 1996 (GamePressure) and reincarnated for a



Figure 2. Lara Croft composite art. She is a preeminent female adventurer in the history of video games, and one of the few to date. Her newest art is displayed to the left, from 2013, with her original art on the right, from the 1990s.

series reboot earlier in 2013 (Square Enix). Lara Croft has been one of the video game industry’s most problematic female characters and is the subject of some of the work I will discuss in my literature review. Furthermore, I grew up in a working class family with very young parents, and getting the most out of any “family”

entertainment was a must; however, these were two of the very few female characters I was able to play ‘as’ while my brother had an almost never-ending supply of male protagonists and

avatars from which to choose.² It always bothered me that, as a girl, I couldn't always 'be' a girl in my favorite video games. There has certainly been an increase in female character development since that time, as well as female-centered games and gaming styles, but the extreme reinforcement of gender roles is still very pervasive – both in and out of game. Several of the works I discuss below focus on just that: the contestation over the idea of a 'female' gamer as something significantly different from a 'male' gamer, and that what she wants from the gaming industry is also something entirely unique than what the 'average' (read: male) one does.

Furthermore, in my fascination and fandom for the video game industry, I often read articles on gaming websites, fan blogs, and other similar websites to keep up-to-date with new game releases as well as discussions of the industry – for good or for bad. One guilty pleasure I have in this is reading through the comments sections of the aforementioned articles and blog posts. There is always one thought that immediately comes to mind whenever sex or gender enters into a thread or discussion: the female body is extremely powerful! I say this for multiple reasons: first, the very strong sentiments implied by the words people use to express their distaste with the portrayal of women in games; second, the very strong sentiments implied by the words people use to defend the gaming industry as well as those same gendered and sexist portrayals; and, finally, the manner in which sexist insults are used to deter women (or pro-feminist/women men) from entering into the gaming world with any remotely feminist or, just simply, negative opinions of how women are portrayed, how they are played, or how they are catered to by the gaming industry. This is precisely what the above quote by O'Malley, aka Dr. NerdLove, a self-proclaimed "dispenser of valuable love and relationship advice to nerds, geeks and neo-maxie-zoom-dweebies" (O'Malley, 2015, para 2), is getting at – the idea that the gaming industry is

² My parents had four children, two of whom bordered on pre-teen, by the time they hit their 30s.

somewhat inherently anti-female and that incredibly strong emotions are tied to keeping it that way.

A trend I started to follow in 2011, I began taking note of the way comment sections became emotionally volatile once women, girls, feminism, or feminist critique began to traverse gaming spaces. First amongst these was when one of the major video game developers, Electronic Arts (EA), added a female avatar to their NHL video game series at the request of a young female fan (Wyshynski, 2011). The article, printed online in the Yahoo! Sports section, was innocuous enough in its discussion of what lead up to the development of a female avatar and the involvement of the 14-year old hockey and video game playing girl. The article, from a non-gaming news source and author, actually highlighted the lack of female avatars in some areas of the industry and celebrated not only the girl for speaking up but also EA for trying to satisfy their fan base for allowing the girl to “finally be herself” in the game (Wyshynski, 2011). However, the comments section of the article erupted with a lot of different reactions, including a great deal of open threats of violence, hostility toward women and/or feminists (as they were conflated), and anger at the company for going “PC”. This will be discussed more specifically later in the dissertation, as it served as a preliminary analysis for the development of one of my case studies. After reading through several pages of the 1500+ comments to this short article, I started to develop the idea for this dissertation, which lead to the creation of preliminary research questions. What are the predominant themes in the comment sections of video game related articles? Are sexist or misogynistic comments characteristic of the comment sections of video game related articles? I struggled to overcome the mounting impression I had that video game culture was growing increasingly hostile toward women – or was being more exposed as such.

The second event was the now famous backlash against and harassment of Anita Sarkeesian following the promotion of her Kickstarter.com critical media project, “Tropes vs. Women in Gaming”. In mid-May, 2012, Sarkeesian created the page, seeking public funding for a multi-part online documentary-style video series discussing the tropes of female characters in video games, past and present (“Tropes vs.”). She was reacted to with death threats, threats of sexual assault, and multiple hacks to her personal and professional websites, including the addition of pornographic images and inflammatory information on her Wikipedia page (Plunkett, 2012; Rosenberg, 2012). This seemed to follow the emotional reactions I saw in the comments section of the Yahoo! Sports NHL article. However, the extreme difference here is that this went much further, as Sarkeesian was directly attacked rather than just hypothetically threatened in digital commentary. What is at the forefront here is a complicated mix of identity development and fervent community protection, a power struggle over who ‘belongs’ and who ‘does not’.

Again, I began thinking through some preliminary research questions to complement those already driving my inquiry. How do self-proclaimed gamers interact in online non-gaming settings? How do self-proclaimed gamers build and reinforce gamer culture through these spaces and interactions? These research questions inform what I believe to be the most important goals of this project. As I will elaborate below, this I believe is representative of the emotionality of online non-gaming space – one of three overlapping spaces I will be discussing. It appears as though it was Sarkeesian’s mere presence, as a self-identified feminist media critic, that ‘caused’ the uproar. Before I describe the way I’m contextualizing emotionality in these spaces, I will provide a bit more background on Sarkeesian and her project, because all three gaming spaces are represented here.

The feminist pop culture media critic and founder of critical media video blog, *Feminist Frequency* (“About”), included examples of the tropes she anticipated analyzing in the originally proposed five-part series, including the “Damsel in Distress”, “The Fighting F#@k Toy”, and “The Sexy Sidekick”. After describing her goals and linking this new series to popular (but significantly smaller) projects she had created and shared through *Feminist Frequency*, Sarkeesian (“Tropes vs.”) concludes her original project proposal with:

Help me create another successful video series that will contribute to and help amplify the existing conversations happening about female characters in games and maybe even get the attention of the gaming industry to start creating more interesting, engaging and complex female characters, that avoid the standard boring clichés.

From the moment she launched her Kickstarter fund up until the explosion of the third event to (co)inspire this dissertation (#GamerGate), an Internet search of the terms “feminist”, “gamer”, and “online harassment” retrieved a plethora of results concerning Sarkeesian and her seemingly benign video game project. Sarkeesian received heavy backlash from the (mostly) male components of video gaming culture (predominantly gamers and critics, but not necessarily those on the end of production). Plunkett (2012), contributing editor to popular video game blog *Kotaku*, bitterly critiqued those involved with the harassment. “There's disagreeing with someone's point of view. There's vehemently disagreeing with someone's point of view. Then, about 17 levels past that, there's this shit” (Plunkett, 2012). Sarkeesian, herself, compiled a long stream of the comments she received on the YouTube page for her Kickstarter video for a *Feminist Frequency* blog post entitled, “Harassment, Misogyny and Silencing on YouTube” (Sarkeesian, 2012). This served as additional basis for my case study, and will be discussed more thoroughly in the build-up to that chapter.

The third event, #GamerGate, briefly mentioned above, is the chronologically most recent in a pattern of escalating intensity in the emotional responses to the ‘place’ of women in gaming culture. According to Weinman (2014), “[w]hether it was supposed to be or not, GamerGate is largely about women” (para 1). Those who promote and tweet under the #GamerGate mantle allege that the intended purpose of the movement was to expose corruption in gaming journalism and push for increased ethics.³ However, it started with one man’s false allegation that his indie-game developer ex-girlfriend slept with a *Kotaku* writer for a good review on her game (Dockterman, 2014a). Lewis (2015) succinctly explains the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of GamerGate, and the way gender and power are at the core:

This months-long social-media fiesta of harassment (of women in games) and hand-wringing (over the future direction of the medium) had its roots in one fundamental fact: men used to dominate gaming, back when gaming meant big console titles that demanded hours of continuous attention. But gaming has changed. (130).

GamerGate started while I had already proposed this project and had been working on it, essentially, for years. I consider this event (co)inspirational as it fit in very well with the motivations for my dissertation, but it clearly wasn’t exactly ‘new’ and certainly didn’t predate my recognition of the need to study this phenomenon. Again, as with the previous two events, I’ll discuss this more thoroughly later in the dissertation.

The media coverage of Sarkeesian’s project, #GamerGate, and the subsequent harassment several women involved in both received, lend credence to the emotionally charged gaming spaces I believe develop around gender, and specifically the female body – both its mediated portrayal and the way anti-feminist, anti-women people react to the presence of vocal women in

³ #GamerGate had been used in tweets approximately 4 million times by December 1, 2014 (Franich, 2014).

online spaces. What interests me most about these particular examples of the online harassment faced by female gamers is the vehemence with which many of the commenters and hackers both attacked Sarkeesian's project goals and the female gamers and bloggers involved in GamerGate, and the energy with which they defended their identities as gamers (and the cultural texts which contribute to the culture) against supposed feminist attacks.

I have divided up the remainder of this introduction into two major sections. The first of which consists of my two-part review of relevant literature that establishes the rationale for this dissertation. *Basic Intersections of Feminism and Media*, consists of a brief literature review that I'll use to establish the groundwork for my project. Following that, I will be focusing on contemporary literature that investigates video games as a medium for critical study. In this subsection, I discuss several different types of video game studies – including quantitative content analyses that look at the portrayals of male and female video game characters, critical discussions of the female gamer and her evolution, as well as discussions of the history of the gaming industry as it relates to academic study.

Introductory Literature Review

Basic Intersections of Feminism and Media

Though I will discuss her with more detail in the theory chapter, Mulvey's (1992) contribution to the trajectory of this project must be addressed here. While I do not plan to specifically interrogate 'the gaze' as it operates in this project, it still must be noted that without it, the first two gaming spaces likely would not exist. Specifically, the gaze is a concept associated with film criticism and theory, and was originally discussed in Mulvey's (1992) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", defined in part through the Freudian psychoanalytic term "scopophilia", the pleasure of looking. Mulvey (1992) identifies three basic cinematic

‘looks’ in her piece, the first of the actual camera that does the filming, the second of the audience on the receiving end of the filmed product, and, finally, the looks exchanged between the actors on the screen (p. 33). At its basic level, the gaze can be drawn multidimensionally: erotic pleasure can be derived from the audience who ‘looks at’ the (most often female) human form on the cinematic screen, as well as derived through narcissistic identification with the looked-at, described as the “long love affair/despair between image and self-image” (25-26). The male gaze is inescapable, and it is through the male gaze that the female looks, as well (Sassatelli, 2011). “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1992, p. 27). This will become particularly clear through the next section of literature, in which I discuss how male-centered the gaming industry is.

My research is primarily informed by feminist media texts, such as those by S. Thornham (2007), *Women, Feminism, and Media*, and van Zoonen (1994), *Feminist Media Studies*. While van Zoonen’s (1994) text is slightly dated in comparison to S. Thornham’s (2007), taken together they provide a detailed overview of the feminist developments in media studies over the course of the last couple decades. While my focus is on video games and the gaming industry, there are several sections of each book that are still quite relevant to the scope of my project. In particular, the manner in which media studies are conducted from a feminist perspective and what it means to position oneself as doing research as such. Specifically, S. Thornham (2007) offers a great way to interpret the visual image as constructed in video game ‘art’ (46-47). While she focuses specifically on painting, photography, and advertising, these three styles of imagery have close connections to those used in video game production. In particular, it is the video game art and advertisements that are the focus of several articles I will discuss in the next section. Additionally, there are other themes within the later chapters that are also applicable to this

project and could inform my work greatly. S. Thornham (2007) discusses research where “the over-visibility of women as sexualized *spectacle* has been contrasted with their virtual omission from those genres seen as having a privileged relation to the real world: news, documentary and ‘current affairs’” (21). This comparison is striking when looking at video game literature that often discusses the position of female characters (as villains, damsels, sidekicks, etc.) in relation to male characters (as heroes, sidekicks, villains, etc.). Furthermore, while not explicit, discussions of the power of the female body are littered throughout her text. Despite the stark contrast in the media discussed here, the messages inferred by the portrayals are similar and directly inform the manner in which I’ll address the gaming spaces I discussed above.

“The Digital Locker Room” and Patterns in Video Game Lit

In his appropriately titled article, “The Digital Locker Room: The Young, White Male as Center of the Video Gaming Universe,” McQuivey (2001) details how the video gaming industry came to be, as well as how it has systematically excluded anyone who falls outside of the White, middle-class male demographic. He likens this phenomenon to the manner in which early humans believed the earth was at the center of the universe and calls upon gamers to expand their horizons as to what constitutes a gamer – “as long as we think we are the center of the universe, we will live in a very small universe; as soon as we move from the center to some random point on the periphery, only then can we fully appreciate the vastness of what we live in” (185). Early video game development can be credited to MIT student Nolan Bushnell in the 1960s, one of the founders of original gaming empire, Atari, and inventor of the groundbreaking game, Pong (McQuivey, 2001). The popularity of Pong led to the development of additional games and the entire arcade industry to house and support them – creating a collective (male) community who played, competed, and (most importantly) spent together (190). This community

of young male arcade gamers is what McQuivey (2001) has termed “the video game locker room” (191). Home consoles were developed in the late 1970s with Atari, but were popularized in a much more mainstream way in the mid-1980s with the introduction of Nintendo and Sega. Computer developers, such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, also made inadvertent contributions to the gaming industry as much of the early community played (and still does play) entirely computer-based games.⁴ However, in his retelling of video game history, McQuivey (2001) frequently notes that the arcade and then home-gaming community was almost exclusively male, middle-class, young, and White. Furthermore, he argues that it was historical gender patterns that predisposed men to excel at science, engineering, and math, which really paved the way for Bushnell, and others, to create and thrive in a technological gaming industry.

McQuivey (2001) invokes postmodern deconstruction to break down science, in general, and the scientific method, specifically, and the manner in which they are heavily embedded with themes that construct false truths about masculinity which have fueled the gaming industry (and other technologically based arenas) (188-189). In particular, he identifies the embedded themes of “male”, “powerful”, and “useful” in science and notes that if it is indeed a way to establish a power structure, then “if you are on the periphery either by virtue of your class or your ideology, you are not the intended beneficiary of the efforts of science, nor are you invited to participate in its practice” (188). Above all else that McQuivey (2001) discusses, this point is particularly important to the scope and purposes of my dissertation. This has become the general attitude in the gaming industry. Through its deep technological roots, gaming culture has an imbedded history of exclusion. Later in McQuivey’s (2001) article, he discusses observational research he

⁴ This is significant because a divide does currently exist between those in the gaming community who exclusively play computer-based video games and those who exclusively play console-based (reliant on a television) video games.

conducted with two male gamers, aged 16 and 24, and the manner in which they were verbally objectifying female game characters while they played a boxing game. He noted that in real-life settings they would not have behaved this way, but the format and context of the video game made it acceptable for them to demean womanhood – something he argues is characteristic of video games and in need of remedy.

Through his research, McQuivey (2001) inadvertently sets up the foundation for the importance of a feminist stance in video game scholarship, as well as the manner in which the emotionality of gaming spaces can be made visible by gamer interaction. By noting that the male-centric gaming industry has grown out of historical patterns of masculine social and labor roles, it's clear that women have been positioned in such a way that any female gamer who became aware of the power structure was in a prime position to develop an active feminist standpoint. However, a critical feminist engagement with video games has never taken quite this perspective on emotionality in gaming spaces into consideration, nor has it been utilized in any other video game literature. The vast majority of video game theory literature has fallen into one of two prevailing camps: research focusing on the in-game portrayals and representations of characters and action (such as masculine and feminine roles, the portrayal of sex, of violence, etc.), or research focusing on the interaction between gamers and their games. I will next briefly discuss literature in these two areas before concluding with the importance of scholarship that focuses on a new category, the one I study in this dissertation – research focusing on gamer-gamer interactions within other aspects of the extended, convergent community.

In H. Thornham's (2011) book, *Ethnographies of the Videogame*, she reinforces my observations about the two major 'types' of video game theory research. In particular, she argues that the primary focus of video game literature is on either what the video game 'offers' to or

what it ‘does’ to the gamer (Thornham, H., 2011). Research centering on what a video game ‘offers’ most often includes work highlighting character and action portrayals, as discussed above, but is mostly characterized by the complete removal of the gamer from research projects. For example, a project that only examines a video game for its art, story, character portrayal, mechanics, or employment of certain technology would fall into this category. It examines the game and its content, but not necessarily how the gamer may interact with any of it. Included here could be research by Dill and Thill (2007), who looked at the gendered representations of male and female game characters on popular gaming magazines. Additionally, Robinson, Callister, Clark, and Phillips (2009) examined the portrayal of male and female video game characters on gaming websites. Furthermore, Chess (2012) investigated the cross-platform (although primarily PC) video game series *Diner Dash* and main character, Flo, and found themes centering on gender, empowerment, work, and leisure. Again, the main focus with research of this type is that it only investigates what happens within the game(s) or how the game’s imagery could be interpreted, but not necessarily how an actual gameplayer may interact with it.

The second type of video game theory research focuses primarily on the manner in which the gamer can be affected or effected by the game. In her semi-auto ethnographic account of her daughter’s entry into the MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) world, Downey (2012) discusses the potential impact two different PC games have on her daughter’s development of her online personalities. In her article, she specifically highlights what impact a male-dominated gaming space has on a girl gamer and how she must increase her voice to be heard (181). Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, and Consalvo (2007) conducted a study to examine intersections in gender and computer game play for adult women gamers and non-

gamers, focusing on the pleasure of play as well as the non-gamer perspective of gaming culture. Finally, another example would be the work by Chumbley and Griffiths (2006), who focused primarily on the affective state of the gamer during their game play, and how a video game can influence that state. For the most part, the affective variables identified in this study (i.e., frustration, excitement, calmness, and boredom) correspond closely to those a marketer would be more interested in, and a critical cultural academic possibly less so. Here the prominent focus is on the way an individual gamer tends to interact with or be affected by their game play. Little of the above research focuses on the way gamers interact with one another and how they actually build a gamer identity that is focused around a predominantly masculine world (though Consalvo, 2012, and Shaw, 2010, have certainly addressed aspects). This area of video game research is particularly important to my project – however, it seriously lacks a critical feminist standpoint, and often includes quantified and falsely drawn objective ‘truths’ about video games and player reception. While this does come closer to what I investigate, it still falls quite short of examining the role of gender and power in the emotional reactions to the female body in gaming spaces.

H. Thornham’s (2008, 2011) primary critique of video game theory scholarship is that it is limiting in its overall coverage of how games are played, enjoyed, and understood (“It’s a Boy Thing”, 2008) and produces technologically-deterministic accounts of gaming (*Ethnographies*, 2011). “Such techno-deterministic accounts work to construct gaming along very particular lines – as solitary, as temporally finite, and above all, as a powerfully affective medium” (Thornham, H., 2011, p. 1). However, for her, what’s important is understanding the context in which the games are actually played, as well as who is playing them within those contexts, because far too

often the gamer's body is ignored in gaming theory (Thornham, H., 2011). Furthermore, she calls for a re-examination of the way scholars approach gaming research, because:

Games are embedded in cultures of domestic technologies and the power dynamics of households, [...] to approach gaming as a text in and of itself underplays the sedimented and nuanced meanings of games as signifiers of gender, identity, and power. (Thornham, H., 2011, p. 8).

H. Thornham's (2011) acknowledgement of the relationship of gender, identity, and power are particularly striking because research on gaming tends to focus on at least one, and maybe two, of those issues, but rarely all three despite the extreme overlap within and significance they play for gamer identity. Additionally, H. Thornham's (2011) four-year project examining 11 different gaming households is unique in not only its use of longitudinal data, but the fact that she examined the domestic spaces in which these games are played and the relationships of the people within the households, as well.

While I think that is certainly an important arena for conducting video game research, I extend that even further to focus not only on the context in which games are played, but the context in which gaming identities are nourished and reinforced. Not only is it important to examine gamer interaction within the context of game play, but it's important to examine gamer interaction outside of that game play and in the other mediums used to establish a true 'gamer' identity. As McQuivey (2001) originally noted, one of the primary focal points of gamer identity is the pride taken with regard to technological prowess, and a natural expansion of the gamer's domination of video game technology is certainly a good grasp of other new media as well – particularly the Internet. It should be evident by now that, for this dissertation project, the 'context' I refer to above includes the manner in which gamers utilize public comment sections

of gamer-related pop news articles, blogs, and videos. In the final section, I will discuss the importance of evaluating these comments from a feminist standpoint and setup the remaining chapters in this dissertation.

This Dissertation

As the above discussion indicates, video game research demonstrates many places in which it overlaps with critical feminist inquiry and the role of emotionality in gaming spaces. Furthermore, a central theme of this dissertation is the idea that the female body is a site of powerful emotion in digital spaces, with prominent focus on spaces of video game playing and discussion. I'm predominantly concerned with why the female body is so powerful in the video gaming industry that it can elicit a range of strong emotions and actions that are often skirted or even neglected in academic studies of the medium (save for studies performed by niche scholars like Chess, Consalvo, and Shaw). The power to affect a player in multiple ways is what makes a video game so unique and so important to any form of cultural studies, but the explicit difference between the way the male body and the female body are cast in these situations makes this an even more important area for feminist critique. Not only is the female body, as a character, a site for pleasure and enjoyment and often hypersexualized, for example, but it is also a site for debate and one that can provoke anger and even hatred (as demonstrated by the three events which inspired this project). At this point, I further developed my preliminary research questions to more solidly address what it is specifically that I am investigating with this dissertation. However, though they may be framed as questions, I moved to thinking about 'research questions' in terms of 'research concerns'. The following research concerns drive my project and inquiry about the intersections of gender, power, and emotion in the gaming industry. Why are female characters often so scantily clad and well endowed, when their male counterparts aren't

always hypersexed in the same way? ⁵ What is it about the simple act of speaking up about wanting a realistic female avatar, so worthy of vehement debate and sexist insults, or even violence? How does the female body elicit such a varied and expansive collection of emotion? What could this possibly say about the status of women as more (or less) than a sum of their parts? Why does the body have so much power?

My primary focus is on what I believe to be three different ways in which emotion and power manifests itself around the female body in digital gaming spaces, and I conduct two case studies to examine these spaces. Two of these areas include the different ways players, viewers, audiences, whatever one would like to call a person who comes into contact with the visual components of a video game, interact with playable- and non-playable video game characters. As discussed above, there is the hypersexualized way in which the female video game character is received – I believe this creates two different spaces. The first space centers around the reaction that predominately male game players experience – one which objectifies the female body, which is usually the intended reaction and the reason the characters are even hypersexed in the first place. The second space would focus on the reaction experienced by predominately female game players – one of experiencing objectification and inadequacy, which is closely related to other critical examinations of unrealistic mediated portrayals of women. For the first two spaces, I conduct a case study in which I utilize visual analysis to unpack the way the female body is portrayed in one specific digital gaming context: one with highly criticized female character portrayals, Square Enix's *Dead Island* (2011). Specifically, an analysis such as this would likely follow closely previous work done on video game character imagery, like the ones mentioned above, but also Beasley and Standley's (2002) "Shirts vs. Skins," as well as Burgess,

⁵ Though they are certainly problematic, as well.

Stermer, and Burgess' (2007) "Sex, Lies, and Video Games." These projects both used quantitative content analyses to examine male and female video game character art for gendered portrayals of masculinity, femininity, and sexualization.

The third and final space is much more complicated than the first two because it grows out of the digital non-gaming space interactions described above – those that appear in comment sections like the Yahoo! Sports one. The reaction to the female NHL avatar and the plethora of abuse put up with by Sarkeesian and those attached to GamerGate demonstrate that the presence of a female body (or bodily imagery) does have the power to affect those interacting in those spaces. For an analysis of this space, I believe a combination of participant observation and comment analysis (e.g., Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) is necessary to fully examine the way gender, power, and emotion operates amongst people in online non-gaming spaces. The actual imagery of the female video game character is often removed in these contexts, and what remains are discussions amongst people that either focus on the female body in theory, or involve a female-bodied or pro-feminist identified person on one end of the dialogue. For this second case study, I extend my use of *Dead Island* (2011) and focus on the controversy around one of the female characters, Purna, and examine the comments and discussion forums specifically about said controversy.

The remaining chapters are broken up into theory, method, my two case studies, and a conclusion. I expand some of the above theory, as well as add substantive discussions on cultural studies, feminist theory, and digital culture. Up to this point, I have used the terms digital culture or digital space without much expansion or context. I felt this was better reserved for the second chapter where I could more adequately build up to and expand that section. My methods section is constructed in a somewhat nontraditional way for a cultural studies project. However, I felt

this was the best way to clearly articulate the methodology used in this dissertation as well as the way my methods triangulate around the two case studies. Each case study is then full articulated in its own chapter, complete with literature review and analysis/discussion. The dissertation ends with what I believe framing my project around one specific video game and a related controversy demonstrates, as well as implications for future projects.

CHAPTER II – THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Researchers must disabuse themselves of any notion that, because a research topic involves the internet, there is no need to be grounded in existing literatures, theories, or methods. Analysts learn the most and are most persuasive when they are able to make their contribution clear by articulating the connections between what they have found and what we already know. (Baym, 2009, p. 181).

Introduction

At the core, this dissertation is one which weaves together both the cultural studies and communication studies disciplines under a more broadly encompassing critical feminist positionality. Furthermore, through both theoretical grounding and methodological employment, I will add to the growing body of new media studies research about digital culture generally and video games specifically. This chapter will establish the means by which I will do so, as well as the fit for my project within interdisciplinary work in these fields. In this chapter on theoretical influences, I will highlight the way in which my research adheres to an historical understanding of cultural studies as well as a feminist theoretical grounding, and more specifically that of feminist media studies. A secondary focus in this half of the chapter is an explanation of the way my project adds to the growing body of digital cultures research. I use this concept broadly to incorporate the way new media has splintered off fandoms and subcultures that develop and foster in digital environments. In this section, I will establish the rationale for studying gaming specifically in a rather large and ever-growing arena of digital and visual culture studies. I end this half of the chapter on the importance of interdisciplinary study of new media – both communication and cultural studies influences on this project will be discussed in this section. I move now to the theoretical framework for this dissertation.

Cultural Studies Foundation

In order to understand the fit of this dissertation within cultural studies, I will first expound on the way the concepts of power, culture, and resistance come together to form the foundation of the field. These three concepts are woven together at the heart of this project, because I am undeniably concerned with the way my research both understands and represents culture in a number of ways. Furthermore, power and resistance play out in a number of ways throughout the project, least of which is the manner in which gamers exercise power over representation and exclusionary online commentary. Power, culture, and resistance have been inextricably woven together in many threads of scholarship throughout the field of cultural studies. Arguably, cultural studies was actually called into being through this triad – an inherent understanding of the need to resist dominant scholarship which sidelined or outright ignored fields of knowledge or sources of culture deemed ‘unworthy’ (Hall, 2007). My articulation of power comes from a Gramscian understanding of the concepts of hegemony and ideology, and is further informed by Althusser’s explanation of (repressive) State apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses. Through Gramsci (2006) and Althusser (2006), a basic understanding of “culture” and “resistance” can be explicated from their articulations of hegemony, ideology, and power in order to set up my discussion of theorists. I will begin specifically with Hall’s (2007) and During’s (2007) explanations of cultural studies as an inherently resistant discipline, a field which includes several decades of evolutionary work involving feminist, race, and queer theory. I do not use the term “evolutionary” casually, I mean to specifically in that with each ‘strain’ of cultural studies work that began tangential development along a particular line of difference, further understandings of power and culture, and subsequent resistance, helped to even further ‘evolve’ these fields within the discipline. I will move from Hall’s (2007) and During’s (2007)

discussions of the development of cultural studies into interrelated feminist articulations of resistance within cultural studies scholarship, including Fraser's explanation of subaltern counter-publics and Hartsock's (2010) development of feminist standpoint theory, before moving on to discuss my fit within the larger context of feminist theory.

According to Gramsci (2006), hegemony, the control of a particular social group which exercises influence in various ways, depends upon a complex power structure because "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (14). Ultimately, hegemony has evolved to include not just political structures, but economic and cultural ones as well, because hegemony is dependent upon not just the existence of a dominant (ruling) class but a subordinate one that accepts the "normative" practices they establish and reinforce as reality and common experience. That is, it is not just outright State control (through established uses of law and policing) which reinforces hegemony, it is the subordinate (subaltern) groups' acquiescence to popular public structures, such as "the press... [e]verything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets" (Gramsci, 2006, p. 16). Thus, the established social group exercises various forms of control over subaltern groups to effect economic, cultural, and governmental trends. Gramsci further argues that part of the control achieved by the dominant groups is through their appeal to the real material interests (e.g., through substantive means, such as living wages, or through superficial ones) of the subaltern groups (During, 2007). Finally, to combat revolution, those "hegemonic forces constantly alter their content as social and cultural conditions change: they are improvised and negotiable, so that counter-hegemonic strategies

must also be constantly revised” (During, 2007, p. 5). This plays out in many ways, but will be expanded on specifically in the articulations of feminist scholarship I will discuss below.

It is through the above articulations of hegemony and ideology that the idea of power is expressed in my understanding of the power-culture-resistance triad. Power builds culture to fit its purposes, in order to sustain itself. Resistance comes in as people struggle to understand their place in dominant culture, as well as fight to expand what constitutes that culture. ‘Culture’ itself is an extremely abstract and ambiguous term, and resistance operates at many different levels and takes many different forms; however, for the purposes of my response, I conceive of power and culture as they come together in the capitalist patriarchal culture exhibited in many Western nations (specifically the United States) and I will expand upon resistances to it next.

Power, culture and resistance have been major concerns of the field. During (2007) describes cultural studies as “of course, the study of culture, or, more particularly, the study of *contemporary* culture” (1) but extends that throughout his introduction clarifying the inherent resistance. “Cultural studies insists one cannot just ignore – or accept – division and struggle” (2) and the close connection between social inequality (and power) and resistance to it help to define the field. At its very foundational core, cultural studies is always the study of power, culture and resistance, in one way or another. “Cultural studies has been, as we might expect, most interested in how groups with least power practically develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products – in fun, in resistance, or to articulate their own identity” (During, 2007, p. 7). For Hall (2007), cultural studies has always been revolutionary and inherently resistant. “But there is something *at stake* in cultural studies, in a way that I think, and hope, is not exactly true of many other very important intellectual and critical practices” (Hall, 2007, p. 35). It is resistance to existing power structures, those that shape culture, that is one of the pivotal reasons

for existing cultural studies projects – if Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall did not resist existing academic structures, if they did not see the inherent power associated with identifying exactly ‘who’ constituted ‘valid culture’, then they would not have set out to disrupt and recreate it. Hall (2007) takes particular care to highlight the extreme effect feminist (and racial, though my focus here will be on feminist) interventions into the field had on those already established in cultural studies.

Again, and again, the so-called unfolding of cultural studies was interrupted by a break, by real ruptures, by exterior forces; the interruption, as it were, of new ideas, which decentered what looked like the accumulating practice of the work... For cultural studies..., the intervention of feminism was specific and decisive. It was ruptural. It reorganized the field in quite concrete ways (Hall, 2007, p. 39).

While early cultural studies scholars may not have intentionally excluded women, the feminist intervention was extremely revolutionary in a discipline that was already built around recognizing and resisting power structures and their influence on culture. My focus on developments along a feminist agenda exemplifies how theorists have continued to push back against power within their cultural moments to expand from previous work done within the field of cultural studies – but the work certainly hasn’t stopped there. The power-culture-resistance triad continues to operate strongly in contemporary research as well. Power-culture-resistance is strong in the work of theorists who push back against this early feminist work that mainly utilized white, middle-class women’s experiences to include contemporary incorporations of third world and borderlands feminisms (e.g., Anzaldua 2010; Narayan, 2008; Talpade Mohanty, 2010). This leads me directly to my connection to broader articulations of an historical understanding of feminist theory.

Feminist Foundation

I'd like to transition into my discussion of various feminist interventions in cultural studies through the work of Lorde (2014). In perhaps her most famous commentary on the need for independent feminist work, Lorde (2014) boldly states

For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (656).

Here she specifically attacks the idea of the always-already subject that Althusser identifies – feminists – women, men, humans – are born into and have so absorbed dominant patriarchal ideology that if any real resistance is to be accomplished, it must come from every direction and it must be totally new. And therein lies one of the greatest sources of resistance in these next few examples – resistance against not only dominant culture and the capitalist patriarchal power that shapes it, but resistance against following the same well-worn paths by fellow male theorists who neglected to consider matters of sex, gender, race, class, etc. when mounting their own insurgencies. Keeping Lorde's (2014) sentiment in mind, she would not believe all resistances are equal; however, I do not think that invalidates their efforts (or outcomes). While these feminist theorists do not all abandon "the master's tools" entirely, they do exemplify the power-culture-resistance triad in their work as they attempt to identify sources of power and formulate some variation on those 'tools' as a means of combating its hold on dominant ideology and culture.

My first example of a cultural studies theorist engaging in a feminist utilization of the power-culture-resistance triad in their work is that of Fraser's (2007) critique of Jurgen

Habermas' public sphere. Note, I will revisit her work again in my second case study (chapter five), as many contemporary Internet scholars have expanded the use of the public sphere into digital culture. According to Habermas (2006), "the public sphere" suggests a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed, which involves private individuals forming a public body (73). The public sphere does not exist simply because a group of people come together, rather it comes into being through the purposeful participation of the people involved (Habermas, 2006). It became a significant arena for public discourse in early bourgeois society because many people (such as merchants) were excluded from formal political institutions and sought discussion through public mass media, such as newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and clubs (Ray, 1993).⁶ The resulting public sphere was one in which excluded people came together to perform democratic discourse and engage in civic communication in an attempt to generate (an assumed) public opinion (Habermas, 2006; Ray, 1993), and serve as a platform to then demand public rights (McGuigan, 1996). It is this generalized articulation of the public sphere that appeals greatly to those who study digital culture and contemporary applications of the sphere to it. The Internet provides a space in which marginalized people can come together to voice opinions and share experiences they may not have the space to otherwise. This relates most directly to video games as this was, until recently, a very niche subculture of people who were considered to engage in a 'low brow' activity.

To continue, Fraser (2007) critiques and expands upon Habermas' original conception of the public sphere, arguing that there is not just one 'bourgeois public sphere', but that there are multiple public spheres. Furthermore, she adds that additional criticisms of Habermas'

⁶ Habermas' original discussion of the public sphere focused on the bourgeois public sphere in part because this group had the means and access to meet publicly and also influence political movement upon doing so.

conceptualization of the public sphere were that it “rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions” including gender and class (491). Additionally, Habermas idealizes the liberal public sphere and does not engage any other competing public spheres to contrast, and also promotes a false equality of the private individuals in the public sphere (Fraser, 2007). Fraser (2007) proposes the existence of multiple public spheres; particularly what she calls “subaltern counter-publics” developed by subordinated social groups that previously fell outside of Habermas’ narrow definition of the bourgeois public sphere (497). A very convincing example of one such subaltern counter-public is that of the US feminist subaltern counter-public who came together in resistance against capitalist patriarchal power (497-498).

Additionally, according to Fraser (2007) “public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (499). Therefore, because of the public spheres’ ties to identity, and the vast cultural differences that exist within them, there cannot be simply one, single public sphere, and they can compete with one another. Fraser expands upon the ‘master’s tools’ by taking Habermas’ public sphere and remaking it into a more fitting representation of subaltern groups and various modes of resistance in order to “invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (497), as well as to partially “offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies” (498). This is more specifically the point in which I find most overlap between digital culture and various applications of the public sphere. The development of identity in these spaces more closely aligns with Fraser’s (2007) critiques.

This leads me to the next example I would like to talk about, Hartsock's (2010) essay, "The Feminist Standpoint: Toward a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." Hartsock (2010) argues that "like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point that can ground a powerful critique of the phallocratic institutions and ideology that constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy" (316). She further argues that her articulation of a feminist standpoint is tied directly to Marx's "understanding of the world from the standpoint of the proletariat [which] enabled him to go beneath bourgeois ideology" (Hartsock, 2010, p. 316). She weaves a discussion of the "sexual division of labor" throughout her argument to stress the social and material dimensions of women's contributions to and oppressions by patriarchal capitalism.

This serves as a prime example of using the "master's tools" in a genuinely positive and productive way. This essay and theory, utilized by many feminist writers, scholars, and activists, does not bow to the master or function as any sort of distraction from a feminists' primary critical goal. As she draws to a close, Hartsock (2010) explains:

Just as the proletarian standpoint emerges out of the contradiction between appearance and essence in capitalism, understood as essentially historical and constituted by the relations of capitalist and worker, the feminist standpoint emerges both out of the contradiction between the systematically differing structures of men's and women's life activity in Western cultures. It expresses women's experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations (327).

Standpoint theory identifies the source of power (capitalist patriarchy) and its role in shaping culture, while also providing a means of resistance through enlightened acknowledgement of subaltern positionality and the perspective it provides. Hartsock (2010) expands upon Marxist

theory, but doesn't necessarily marry it to feminist theory for critical inquiry. Her articulation of a standpoint is nonetheless an important contribution to feminist theory, and one that has been discussed and used a great deal since its development.

McCann and Kim (2010) specifically address the issues of homogeneity in early feminist work, and that despite the desire to conduct scholarship and political activity that diverges from patriarchal oppression, a great deal of feminism seems to have (re)created its own narrow and limiting system similar to patriarchy. One of the goals of their reader is to destabilize the thought that there can be *a* definitive gender experience, generalizable to all women. Specifically, "given that women live in so many different social, economic, cultural, and political circumstances, there can be no one theory of gender subordination or a best strategy for change... the feminist identities articulated within this anthology also shift and change with these interruptions, overlaps, disjunctures, and contradictions" (4). The ultimate effect that this collection of various feminist work has is on addressing, as McCann and Kim (2010) note, the "faulty logic [that i]f one is not a member of a subordinate group, then one is unaffected by the processes of domination which define that group" (6). Reading pieces that disrupt the idea of any central feminist experience, and discuss both U.S. and non-U.S. third world feminist and borderlands issues that both directly and indirectly impact my white, Ohioan life, have had a significant impact on (re)shaping my understanding of contemporary feminisms.

The majority of my feminist experiences could be categorized under the umbrella of liberal feminism, where (previously) my concerns were typically on reproductive rights, access to equitable employment, and egalitarian classroom conduct. In other words, the false idea that 'equal treatment for all' will solve the world's problems. And, by "world," I subconsciously only thought of certain segments of the "U.S." Throughout my time exposed to critical feminist

theory, it has become increasingly clear that this is a rather common problem faced by many feminists who are neither exposed to alternative forms of feminisms and who also do not seek them out on their own. Much like the way K-12 students grow accustomed to a certain hegemonic, patriarchal view of U.S. History, many young feminists are only exposed to the more popularized and normative historical feminist texts which can leave them ill-equipped to think outside the privileged Western feminist's box. However, by reading texts which are situated from a multitude of perspectives and which frame white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists' experiences as simply *one* of many other experiences, I have been able to more widely locate my understanding and employment of feminism. I had previously viewed feminism in a can 'do no harm' sort of way, but have grown to understand that it is subject to the same power struggles, privileged positions, and oppressions effecting any political movement, philosophy, or theoretical stance. Furthermore, I have also grown to learn that I have a responsibility to not just acknowledge my awareness of these oppressions, but to embrace them and their resulting impact on my own evolving feminism.

Establishing my evolution as a feminist and the feminist theory to which I am drawn is important to my dissertation in a number of ways. First, and most generically, the primary artifact, the video game *Dead Island* (explained more thoroughly in my methodology), I used for this project was inspired by my desire to understand the racist and gendered representation of one of the main characters, the half-Aboriginal Purna, and move beyond studying the most famous white female adventure video game heroine – Lara Croft – discussed in my introductory chapter. Second, and more pointedly, I make great efforts to work outside of the standard liberal, “white feminism” that is most popularized by contemporary engagement with feminism outside of the academy (e.g., Lena Dunham and Beyoncé feminism). It is through my personal and

political development as a feminist outside and within the academy that directly influences the way my dissertation takes shape. I will briefly discuss the way my previously hegemonic understanding of feminism has been destabilized through the way I originally learned about feminism – from an historical perspective and forward to contemporary feminist issues.

It seems to be a well-established generic to begin tracing the history of feminism with the first wave of the U.S. women's movement, mainly women's suffrage, and then proceeded forward (in time) from there through the second wave and civil rights, up to the confusing third wave, fourth wave, and post-feminism discussions that often get lumped into one muddled section. Betty Friedan's *the Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Simone de Beauvoir's *the Second Sex* (1952) remain literary rites of passage for any self-respecting, aspiring feminist. They are still so widely circulated and discussed because they represent key points in U.S. feminist history. However, despite proliferation, I would argue that two of the most important, popular feminist texts, to this day, were extremely limiting in their consideration of global vs. local feminist issues and their targeted audiences. However, it is really only in retrospect and in comparison to other feminist texts that I make this argument; for example, a poem (1911) by Japanese feminist, Yosano Akiko, and a selection (1949) by Inji Aflatun, an Egyptian activist.

This seems like the epitome of redefining 'difference' for myself within the context of these theorists. Difference surrounds us as feminists – through the way we differentiate ourselves from other political positions, through the way we acknowledge the variations that exist in the definitions of the term "feminist", through the ways we need to further embrace what maintains and reinforces our own differences as women and men and how that actually closes more gaps than we readily admit. As previously quoted, McCann and Kim (2010) specifically highlight differences based on "race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and sexuality [as they] intersect with

gender” (5). But what stands out to me is the similarities and overlaps that can be seen within these differences – for example, all lesbian women’s experiences are not the same and there is no reason why a non-lesbian woman couldn’t see overlaps in her own experiences of gender oppression (e.g., see Tallen, 2008).

My apprehension in speaking entirely about third-world feminisms arises from my own recognized ‘difference’ in that I am not from a third-world country and am absolutely not a woman of color, but I embrace this apprehension because I do still see similarities in these differences. I experience gender oppression based on my sex and perceived gender, I know how my class, family’s religion, and my (lack of) access to medical care have influenced my further development of differences as the low-income, recovering Catholic, disabled woman that I am in a constant state of becoming. Simply occupying a white, heterosexual, female body should not bar me from attempting to understand and navigate the positionality of a wealthy, Indian-American bisexual student (e.g., Sayeed, 2010), nor should it be used as an excuse not to have to try. An important part of learning about these differences is realizing there should be no hierarchical structure for ranking some feminist experiences as more pure or worthy of attention than others, which seems to be the biggest problem with Western hegemonic feminism. Without this hierarchy, to what projects should priority be given? More importantly, why is prioritizing ‘levels’ of gender oppression even something any human should be able to do?

Continuing my discussion of these early feminist writings, neither Yosano (2010) nor Aflatun (2010) give any indication that they were acting under the tutelage of a white Western feminist mentor nor any other influence save for their own personal social and political ones. According to McCann and Kim (2010), Yosano (2010) was one of the leading writers and poets of early modern Japan and her poem was published in the first Japanese feminist literary journal

(13). Additionally, Aflatun (2010) was active throughout the 1940s and 1950s in Egyptian liberation movements, her essay serving as an example of early advocacy for Egyptian women's full political rights (McCann & Kim, 2010, p. 13). Both feminists were active in larger political situations – Yosano (2010) through writing and poetry, without specification that it was always or exclusively feminist writing, and Aflatun (2010) in a similar manner – that were important to their local surroundings. They were aware and actively sought change for themselves, fellow citizens, and fellow women; and were not dependent on Western feminist permissions to be so. While only two, small examples, these readings have helped me to understand that feminist scholarship does not begin and end with women in the United States. Additionally, this point was further made through the following piece by Uma Narayan.

Narayan (2010) criticizes the exclusionary focus of Anglo-American feminist epistemology and the impression/impact on nonwestern feminism. She uses her position as a nonwestern, Indian feminist living in the U.S. to help articulate the difficulties she faces straddling the line between meaningful Indian feminism and avoiding prejudicial Western feminist influences. Narayan (2010) takes great care to present a number of Western hegemonic feminist concerns, and then dissect them as they relate to non-western, non-hegemonic feminist issues. She highlights the similarities she views between criticisms of arranged Indian marriages and the façade of “romantic love” and marriage in the U.S, the attacks on positivism and hypocrisy of glossing over colonialism or false empathy for those living under its oppression. Furthermore, Narayan (2008) takes a more pointed position in discussing the concept of “death by culture”, or the manner in which Western feminists have a habit of blaming Third World cultural ‘traditions’ for the deaths of their women. She uses this piece to highlight, again, some of the perceived differences between Indian and U.S. (or other Western) culture that are actually

more similar than readily admitted. Here, she talks about domestic violence through Western conceptions of dowry-murders and bride-burning as they compare to domestic violence in the United States:

In contrast to “dowry-murder,” *fatal* forms of domestic violence in the United States are a problem lacking a term that “specifically picks them out” from the general category of “domestic violence.” I believe that this “absence” operates to impede Americans from making the connections that would facilitate their seeing dowry-murder as a form of domestic violence (Narayan, 2008, p. 216).

Narayan (2008) goes on to further examine the similarities and differences between Indian and U.S. American domestic violence cases, as well as the way these differences are most often “exoticized” and exploited by Western feminists as causes to rally behind. She ends her piece with a reimagining of what border-crossing feminist examinations look like when positions are swapped: instead of a white, Western feminist examining an ‘Othered’ Indian cultural issue, what happens with an Indian feminist travels the U.S. examining and writing about domestic violence and American culture. After this descriptive rhetorical situation, she ends with “books that cannot be written and chapters that are oddly difficult to write might have more to teach us about particular cultures and their relationships to “Other cultures” than many books and chapters that face few difficulties in being either imagined or written” (225).

While this tracing of my foundational feminist theoretical influences may seem a bit drawn out and unrelated to a dissertation on digital culture and gaming, I promise it will come together shortly. I have always had a somewhat complicated relationship with feminist theory – I’m drawn much more to theorists who speak to nonwestern feminist ideals, as illustrated above, and socialist feminist influences, such as Harding (2008), Hartmann (2010), and Hartsock

(2010). Yet, the subjects I'm concerned with academically tend to center on popular media effects on youth audiences – which do not always tie in as directly with the theorists from which I draw. However, as I stated, though this has strongly influenced how I have developed as a critical feminist, personally and politically, specifically media-oriented feminist theorists align more closely with the way in which I conduct my academic research. I believe outlining the difference between the two is important, though. The next section will focus entirely on feminist media theorists and the more direct way they inform the research in this dissertation.

Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies are inextricably tied to the field of cultural studies. According to van Zoonen (1994), of central importance to feminist media studies is a concentration on gender, power, and culture; which, as I argued previously, are of the founding principles of cultural studies (i.e., power, culture, and resistance). The addition of gender is what constitutes the feminist overlap in this scholarship, in which, according to van Zoonen (1994), “gender is a, if not the, crucial component of culture” (6). Feminist media studies attempt to understand the way gender fits into all components of mediated culture – production, representation, and reception – ranging from high to low culture with an historical tradition of focusing primarily on the role of women. (Thornham, S., 2007; van Zoonen, 1994). However, the focus on what could constitute ‘low culture’ has been of particular prominence in this field. What have been referred to as “women’s genres” (e.g., soap operas) play a prominent role in early feminist media studies where “the emphasis has been on understanding the pleasures, complexities and contradictions of these productions” (Thornham, S., 2007, p. 7). van Zoonen (1994) continues, “the uneasy connection between the pleasures of popular culture and the political aims of feminism is by now more or less a classic issue in feminist and media theory, emerging from the particular

conjunction between cultural and feminist studies” (7). With the turn of the digital age, study of ‘low’ and popular culture is especially growing in feminist media studies, especially given the explosion of video games and gaming culture throughout the last decade.

I would be remiss to not establish the influence of and historical precedent set by the concepts ‘the gaze’ and ‘spectatorship’ within feminist media studies. A central aspect of this dissertation is the manner in which the female body can elicit emotion in digital gaming spaces. Crucial to this argument would be the idea that this body is being gazed upon in one way or another, in order for any response to occur. According to Loshitzky (2003), Mulvey’s (1992) conceptualization of the gaze was groundbreaking, and helped with a feminist definition of cultural politics in media studies – essentially one of the earliest true feminist media contributions to scholarship. The gaze is a concept associated with film criticism and theory, and was originally discussed in Mulvey’s (1992) “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, defined in part through the Freudian psychoanalytic term “scopophilia”, the pleasure of looking. She identifies three basic cinematic ‘looks’ in her piece, the first of the actual camera that does the filming, the second of the audience on the receiving end of the filmed product, and, finally, the looks exchanged between the actors on the screen. At its basic level, the gaze can be drawn multidimensionally, erotic pleasure can be derived from the audience who ‘looks at’ the (most often female) human form on the cinematic screen, as well as derived through narcissistic identification with the looked-at, described as the “long love affair/despair between image and self-image” (Mulvey, 1992, pp. 25-26). Mulvey (1992) argues that the gaze is characteristically male or masculine because it is the (heterosexual) male’s pleasure in looking that is the focus of cinema and that it is split into an active/male and oppressive passive/female duality. The male gaze is inescapable, and it is through the male gaze that the female looks, as well (Sassatelli,

2011). “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1992, p. 27).

In addition to Mulvey’s (1992) use of the gaze in her research, there have been many others to use the concept through feminist film criticism. For example, Clover (1992) describes the “assaultive gaze”, the horror film’s “cause, its effect, its point... the simple act of staring can terrify, maim or kill its object – that a hard look and a hard penis... amount to one and the same thing” (182). Other feminist media critics have used the gaze when discussing masochistic representations of strippers and tough women in action films (Brown, 2001, 2004), male-controlled sexualized female video game characters (Herbst, 2004), and killer women (Inness, 1994), to name a few. Additionally, Manlove (2007) notes that the gaze has also been used to analyze hierarchical power relations outside of a strict use in film theory, including literary and cultural studies, black/whiteness studies, critical race theory studies, and postcolonial studies, which utilize variations of the “active male gaze”, such as the “white” and the “black” gazes, the “animal” gaze, and the “imperial” gaze (84).

Some critics of Mulvey’s (1992) original definition of the gaze argue that she adheres too strictly to the idea that the male is always active, that the female is always passive, and that the duality is heteronormative (e.g., Manlove, 2007; Loshitzky, 2003). For example, Brown (2001, 2004) agrees with critics who believe the female character can sometimes offer a more active, masochistic gaze that encourages submission in male viewers. Furthermore, Yaquinto (2004), while maintaining that Mulvey’s (1992) gaze is still useful, argues that the original definition has become dated by an increase in more complicated mediated portrayals of women. Manlove (2007) adds that many feminist critics, including Teresa de Laurentis, also question the overall gender of the gaze, as well as the role of pleasure. It is through these extensions of the original

film criticism usage and criticisms of the concept that I apply it to my dissertation. While more contemporary film and television portrayals of women, and certainly producers of those portrayals, have evolved since Mulvey's (1992) original theoretical conception, I argue that in many ways video games are still stuck in a stunted development that lacks that contemporary evolution.

Furthermore, spectatorship goes hand-in-hand with my explanation of the gaze, the inescapable perspective that the male is the looker and the female is the object of visual pleasure and looked-at-ness. Spectatorship, then, applies to the audience who is at the receiving end of cinematic pleasure (Sassatelli, 2011). While the gaze is the action that gives pleasure, the spectator is the one who receives the visual pleasure from looking. This distinction is important because the gaze can be applied to more than just the audience – the gaze is created with the camera used to film, is created by the characters in the film, and then is also created by the audience through spectatorship (Mulvey, 1992). Of focus here is not just the portrayal of the characters on the screen, or simply on the female form for pleasure, but the way in which the audience receives, interprets, and digests that visual imagery. One example, in particular, again is Clover (1992), in which she analyses both the gaze associated with the horror film genre, but the role of the audience as well. Additionally, in a move away from film criticism, S. Thornham (2007) discusses the female spectator with respect to advertising and consumption. She argues that the female spectator of advertisements targeting women are still engaging in spectatorship through the male gaze for male pleasure, mostly because of the image of femininity that popular advertisements portray (Thornham, S., 2007). These concepts will play a pivotal role in my visual analysis chapter, as the most direct connections to the gaze and spectatorship can be drawn

here, but I also make arguments for their applicability to the study of other digital spaces, as well. This is mainly due to the role of emotion in this project, which I will discuss next.

Emotion and/or Affect, or What?

According to Wise (2003), affect refers to intensity – “[w]hile emotions are nameable, graspable, affect is not. Indeed, affect – as intensity – is asignifying and preconscious. Affect is a gap (when words and conscious reactions fail), but it is a gap overflowing with energy and intensity, its potential” (120). As I argued during the proposal stage of this dissertation, there certainly is a level of intensity that surrounds the manner in which users contribute to online discussions. The reactions of many within the gaming subculture throughout GamerGate, for example, were, for lack of a better word, intense. So intense as to be irrational in many ways. According to Järvinen (2009), it’s entirely possible that games are designed with the specific intention of eliciting certain types of emotions. He is careful to distinguish between emotion and pleasure, and specifically articulates five categories of emotions that gameplay draws out. It could therefore be argued that emotionally charged gamers are not uncommon, as the games they play intend them to be. However, that’s a very bold statement, and certainly beyond the scope of this dissertation. Important here, though, is the contrast between “affect” and “emotion”.

It’s almost too easy to conflate emotion and affect, in particular when attempting media studies that incorporate real people/audiences at some level (Nabi, 2009). Throughout the history of media effects research, emotion has been studied as it relates to media selection, media response, and message processing (Nabi, 2009). The same could be said for most other academic disciplines. For example, Gross (2014) identifies at least four different ways “affect” and “emotion” are confused in academic and clinical research – including, as interchangeable concepts, where affect is the experience of emotion, where affect is the behavioral component of

emotion, and others (p. 6). However, in an interview for *the Affect Theory Reader*, Grossberg (2010) makes a clear case for the differences between the two.

I am not sure that emotions can simply be described as affect, even as configurations of affect. I have always held that emotion is the articulation of affect and ideology. Emotion is the ideological attempt to make sense of some affective productions. (Grossberg, 2010, p. 316).

Therefore, in order for me to be able to properly address affect, beyond my own, I would need to do audience studies that assess ideology in some way. Because that is not a current component of my dissertation project (though, clearly a future extension) I cannot adequately address true affect in this study. What I can, and do, do is address the way emotions play out around discussion of the female body in the digital spaces of gaming culture. Of utmost importance, then, is also making clear my understanding of, and what interventions I hope to make within, digital culture and visual culture studies.

Digital Culture and Visual Culture Studies

Digital Culture

Although this dissertation is firmly rooted in cultural studies and feminist media studies, a primary aim is to contribute to the growing field of digital culture scholarship. There is some confusion as to what precisely digital cultures studies are, however, as the concepts of “digital culture”, “cyberculture”, “Internet”, and “new media” studies have all been conflated and used interchangeably (Reed, 2015; Silver, 2004, 2006). While some of the ambiguity of this terminology is purely semantic, some of it is not. Throughout this section I will be covering literature that uses these terms in a similar manner, but for the sake of clarity I will be discussing this field under the umbrella term digital culture. I prefer “digital” mainly because my focus is on

the medium, rather than the philosophical and historical connotations associated with “cyber” and the cyborg. Thus, the literature I draw from will also primarily adhere to a discussion of digital media and associated culture. In addition to a more global discussion of digital culture, I will also highlight the way digital culture and visual culture studies blend together to help form the basis of my examination of video games and digital gaming culture.

In an attempt to map digital culture studies as a distinct disciplinary field, Silver (2006) explains that at its most basic premise, it is “a critical approach to new media and the contexts that shape and inform them” (6). Furthermore, according to Bell (2001), intrinsic to understanding digital culture is understanding the components that comprise it – digital, ‘online spaces’ and ‘culture’.⁷ He borrows from Hine’s (2000) articulation of the Internet as both culture and cultural artifact:

Cyberspace is... something to be understood as it is lived... At one level, thinking of cyberspace as culture emphasizes this point: it is lived culture, made from people, machines, and stories in everyday life... Thinking about cyber space as cultural artifact means considering how we’ve got cyberspace as it currently exists... The trick is to think about cyberspace as product of and producer of culture simultaneously. (Bell, 2001, p. 2)

Both Bell (2001) and Silver (2004, 2006) agree that a primary aspect of digital culture studies is the concern with resistance, which helps marry it closely to cultural studies traditions. With this dissertation project, digital culture as both producer and product of culture fits in very well with gaming studies, which it almost goes without saying are a form of new media. As a further extension of the idea that digital culture is both culture and cultural artifact, Bell (2001) explains

⁷ David Bell is the author and editor of several texts on “cyberculture” but uses the concept in a way that can be interpreted as I use “digital culture” (as per Silver’s, 2004, argument). I will use “cyber” in direct quotes from his work, but “digital” in my own discussions.

that methodological tools are a very important component for actually performing the study of digital culture – which is also extremely important to visual culture studies, which I will discuss at the end of the chapter.

Visual Culture Studies

I end this chapter with an overview of visual culture studies (VCS), which shares many characteristics with the previously discussed concept of digital culture. According to Pink (2012) an overlap of theory, method, and technology are central to VCS. My analysis of video games falls well within the realm of VCS, and as such I treat this as somewhat more of a methodological tool than a theoretical concept. However, because theory and method are so tightly bound, I'm discussing VCS in both my theory and methods chapters (referred to as visual culture analysis, VCA, in my methods chapter). There is a built-in interdisciplinarity to this field, as it incorporates aspects of both cultural studies and communication studies, as well as other areas of academic scholarship. Lister and Wells (2001) explain that VCS grows out of both cultural studies and media studies, to which Pink (2008) adds visual anthropology as a foundational discipline and Nakamura (2008) adds art history and film studies. Nakamura (2008) further identifies visual culture studies as:

[L]ess interested in communication per se than are other fields, [whereas] its focus on the production, technology, and reception of the visual image seemed particularly appropriate in relation to the Internet, a form with an increasingly visual bent, a development trajectory measured in months rather than years, a diversifying population of users and producers, a serious and thoroughgoing intervention into American culture and media practices, and a corresponding crying need for flexible, rigorous, and multimediated forms of analysis. (Nakamura, 2008, p. 5).

VCS, by extension, is that ‘flexible, rigorous, and multimediated form of analysis’ Nakamura (2008) calls for.

Additionally, for Lister and Wells (2001), VCS at its core is not just the study of images – the visual – but also the context and production of it. Here, again, the closely bound together idea that VCS is all at once about theory, method, and technology. However, it is again Nakamura (2008) who contextualizes VCS in the manner more closely aligned with my concerns.

Performing close readings of digital visual images on the Internet and their relation to identity, itself now an effect as well as a cause of digitality, produces a kind of critique that takes account of a visual practice that is quickly displacing television as a media-based activity in the United States. (Nakamura, 2008, p. 11)

Though her primary concern is the visual in online space, this is still quite closely tied to an examination of video games and gaming culture. Gaming visuals cross many mediated planes – they are one of the ultimate convergence media. Thus, by studying video game visuals from a VCA perspective, it becomes possible to gain a better understanding of the crossover between gaming and digital culture, as this dissertation project attempts to do.

The Next Chapter

As is evident, my background in communication and media studies has greatly influenced my development as a critical feminist, cultural studies scholar. Now that I have thoroughly traced my theoretical influences and the manner in which they have helped me construct this dissertation, I will move on to discussing my methodology. The next chapter contains the methodological framework for this dissertation project – including the specific methods for both of the case studies performed for data collection and analysis. I also explain the primary artifact

that I have used to anchor this entire project and begin to discuss the overall influence for this type of critical feminist media project in that chapter. It must be noted that the next chapter is quite lengthy as it includes the breakout discussion of the methodology for both case studies – which is not further discussed beyond that chapter. In order to simplify my analyses in each case study, methodology is kept strictly within chapter four.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

That feminist research has social commitments does not make it unique. Most research traditions are motivated by larger social purposes and their products are rarely if ever value-free. However, feminist inquiry is unusual in being explicit about its ethical and political stance, which motivates feminist to seek out and challenge the social biases lurking often unnoticed in existing knowledge claims. In the end, the tradition of feminist research is uniquely distinguished by its dedication to the value of gender justice in knowledge and in the world, a dedication that carries with it a commitment to oppose all those other injustices that are inseparable from gender divisions. (Jaggar, 2008, ix)

Introduction

Before I move on to the particulars of the case studies that build and support my argument about gender, power, and emotion in gaming spaces, I first bridge the connection between my theory and methodological choices. As with my theoretical grounding, my methodology is structured around a feminist framework, which will be explained prior to my overview of the specific methods employed for the case studies. In order to address my centralized research concerns, outlined in the introductory chapter, I have conducted two interconnecting studies using different methodological constructions. I use visual analysis for the gameplay and cut scenes of one specific video game for my first study, and a combination of qualitative content analysis and participant observation of online commentary of gaming-related news stories and online gaming forums (about the game I played) for the second. Underscoring both studies, as well as the structure of this entire dissertation, is also a rough use of autoethnography. In my attempt to position myself centrally in the most open way possible throughout this project, I have taken to an almost ‘journaling’ style for some discussion. I will thoroughly explain my use of autoethnography, and the texts and complete methods for both of my case studies in this chapter, but the related literature and analyses will follow in individual chapters (i.e., chapters four and five, respectively) for each study subsequent to this overview.

What is Feminist Methodology?

Having established my background with feminist theory and feminist media studies in the previous chapter, I thought it was important to address what I mean by feminist methodology (and method) specifically in this chapter. According to Harding (1987), a great deal of confusion existed in feminist inquiry about what makes a methodology distinctly feminist throughout much of the disciplines life. She argues that this has a lot to do with understanding the differences between “method”, “methodology”, and “epistemology”. Again, as already stated, my epistemology was outlined in the previous chapter so more clearly distinguishing between methodology and method are my goals here. The latter half of this chapter is reserved for the specific articulation of my method, while I’ll open the former half with an explanation of how I’ve approached building my methodology. My methodology aligns with my theory and is how I believe my research should be conducted, while the method is the technique I’ve used to do so (Harding, 1987). This is all extremely standard practice for any academic, but what’s of issue here is what establishes my methodology and method as part of a specifically feminist tradition of research.

According to Hesse-Biber (2007), “[f]eminists ask “new” questions that place women’s lives and those of “other” marginalized groups at the center of social inquiry. Feminist research *disrupts* traditional ways of knowing to create rich new meanings...” (3, emphasis original). Naples (2003) adds that, for her, a feminist method is about addressing research questions “that are simultaneously personally, politically, and academically significant... concerned with understanding and fighting inequality and injustice” (13). With this dissertation project, a primary driving force was to understand the toxic culture that surrounds the female body in digital spaces, and my research concerns were built around subjects I was personally motivated

to understand. I placed women centrally in my project about gaming spaces in which they are so frequently pushed to the side, ignored, attacked, and often forced to conform. However, Harding (1987) warns that one of the dangers of feminist research is the tendency to believe that simply ‘adding women’ will make a project inherently feminist. In constructing my methodology, I sought to ensure I wasn’t simply making this a project about women and hoping that through osmosis it would be magically feminist. All of my choices had specific intention – my adherence to feminist theory, my attempt to contribute to specifically feminist media scholarship, and my choices of method. I also worked to anchor myself within the project, because as Harding (1987) argues “[t]he best feminist analysis goes beyond these innovations in subject matter in a crucial way: it insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plan as the overt subject matter” (9).

That being said, I carefully structured this study into two distinct, overlapping case studies each with a unique method, because I agree with Hesse-Biber (2007), and the many feminist scholars who came before her.

[T]here is no single feminist epistemology or methodology. Instead, multiple feminist lenses wake us up to layers of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist points of view. Some lenses provide radical insights into knowledge building that upends traditional epistemologies and methodologies, offering more complex understandings and solutions toward reclaiming subjugated knowledge. (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4)

I sought to understand my subject and address my research concerns using more than one method in the hopes that this would help to bring different perspectives to light that may not have been as easily understood or seen using a uniform method for each of the different digital

spheres incorporated into this project. Each method fits into my feminist methodology, in turn growing out of my feminist epistemology.

Note on Autoethnography

For me, a major part of this dissertation project has always been the visceral way I have personally reacted to the material I read. By that, I mean the comment sections and message forums I've been pouring over for the last several years and not necessarily the academic examination of any similar material. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), "researchers often fuse their personal interests with their professional pursuits [...], and] treat their research agenda as a way to explore issues related to their biographical selves" (76-77). Autoethnography can work really well to trace a researcher's own affective engagement throughout the research process. I will further discuss the lack of interview and focus groups in the limitations section of the sixth chapter. Before I move on to discussing the specific methods used for my case studies, I must first detail the manner in which I understand and am employing autoethnography. It is important note, however, that this section may appear somewhat misplaced in comparison to the descriptions of method to come. The rationale here is that I employ autoethnography almost as I would employ theory, it underscores most of my chapters and informs the way I have written up this dissertation as opposed to functioning as a methodological means to an end, as with my case studies. I position my explanation of the method here, in the third chapter, as it is a methodology, but as a precursor to the larger methodological explanations of my case studies, because I do consider my use of it separate.

Because I use ethnography specifically in one of my case studies, I would be remiss to not mention the overlaps between autoethnography and ethnography here. There are of course many parallels between autoethnography and ethnography. For example, they each use a very

similar research process, including systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of cultural data. Like ethnography, autoethnography is both a process *and* a product, and autoethnographers attempt to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). However, there are still several distinctive methodological features that set autoethnography apart from ethnography. According to Chang (2008), one important feature is the primary purpose of autoethnography: “the pursuit of cultural understanding underlying autobiographical experiences” (p. 49). At the initial stage of research, autoethnography begins with the familiar whereas the ethnographer begins with the unfamiliar (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography is not just about the self, but rather “about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self” (Chang, 2008, p. 49). The self is the lens and the individual is the focus (as opposed to a group), but only in relation to the bigger social/cultural narrative. Paramount to me is the emphasis placed on emotion, asking “[h]ow emotions are important to understanding and theorizing the relationship among self, power, and culture... [T]exts focus on creating a palpable emotional experience as it connects to, and separates from, other ways of knowing, being, and acting in/on the world” (Holman Jones, 2008, pp. 210-211).

The use of autoethnography is certainly not a novel methodology within feminist and cultural studies work. However, as I have located myself somewhat centrally as a driving force behind this project, it would be disingenuous of me to not acknowledge the way my own emotion pours out onto the page. Autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 209). This project grew heavily out of the way I personally react to the development of video game and digital culture, and it seems very fitting that I address and embrace that more overtly. Furthermore, “[autoethnography is] a self-narrative that critiques the

situatedness of self and others in social context” (Spry, 2001, p. 710), with “personal/professional/political emancipatory potential” (Spry, 2006, p. 183), while texts “democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power” (Neumann, 1996, p. 189). For the digital spheres with which I am engaging, dominant patriarchal power often goes unfettered. By writing myself into my dissertation, I hope to demonstrate how both I as a gamer and I as a feminist fit into the cultural narrative of online gaming experience.

According to Ellis and Bochner (2003), autoethnography itself can be understood as falling along a continuum that allows for a variety of research approaches. What’s key here is how the autoethnographer places emphasis within their research experience – this can mean that emphasis is placed on the research process (-graphy), on culture (-ethnos), or on the self (-auto) (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). While still placing emphasis on one of three areas explained above, definitions and important features of autoethnography do vary amongst researchers. This has resulted in a wide variety of the ways in which autoethnography can be known; for example, as autobiography, collaborative autobiography, ethnobiography, ethnographic poetics, lived experience, experiential texts, radical empiricism, amongst many others (e.g., Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). According to Chang (2008), “all aspects of life can become a subject of autoethnography” (51). Additionally, autoethnographers must “be willing to dig deeper into their memories, excavate rich details, bring them onto examination tables to sort, label, interconnect, and contextualize them in the sociocultural environment” (Chang, 2008, p. 51). This requires research topics with depth, as well as width. This also requires a researcher willing to dedicate the time necessary to perform this kind of method, as well as really expose themselves. Research topics can vary in intensity, as they can be quite personal and private, can include any aspect of

the self in relation to others, and can be emotive in nature. Topic examples include: parent-child relationships (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2007), pregnancy (e.g., Faulkner, 2012), [insert any] identity (e.g., Ferrell, 2012; Griffin, 2012), architecture (e.g., Williams & Morrissey, 2000), student teaching (e.g., Calafell, 2007; Granger, 2011; Schippers, 2010), White privilege, military service (e.g., Hicks, 2011), dancing (e.g., Jewett, 2008), and many others.

What is involved in performing an autoethnography can vary as much as the available topics, but there is a general four-step procedure that can be adapted for most projects, as taken from Chang's (2008) *Autoethnography as Method* and Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez's (2012) *Collaborative Autoethnography*. The basic steps of an autoethnography are: data collection, data organization and management, analysis and interpretation, and write-up. My performance of autoethnography followed this basic four-step procedure rather closely, but has been peppered throughout this document from the start. I relied on a combination of personal memory data, data from the past (Chang, 2008), and self-observational data, documentation of the researcher's "own activities and actions as they unfold at the present time of the study" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012, p. 74). I struggled with my analysis and interpretation of data, as "[t]he processes of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished" (Chang, 2008, p. 125). This is what separates ethnography and, specifically, autoethnography, from pure memoir, storytelling, and mere description. It allows for the individual story to be placed within the larger cultural/social contexts. With this process, analysis and interpretation are not synonymous, as analysis stays focused on the data and interpretations go beyond the data to find cultural meanings.

There are four common styles for the autoethnographic manuscript: descriptive-realistic, Ellis and Bochner's (2003) version of thick description; confessional-emotive, where the

emphasis is on exposure, confusion, and dilemmas in life, analytical-interpretive, a balance between analysis, interpretation, and description, and creative-imaginative, which pushes boundaries by using poetry, fiction, and drama as an element. Different combinations of the four can also be used in the write-up of the final project. My autoethnographic narrative follows most closely with a combination of the descriptive-realistic and confessional-emotive formats. My performance of this method is woven throughout my entire project, from my introduction to my analyses, and discussion of my results. The primary goal of my dissertation is to interrogate the marginalization of women in digital spaces through the focus of one specific gaming experience. I move next to discussing the way these methods ‘fit’ together.

Triangulation of Methods

Note on mixed methods vs multiple methods. I consider the manner in which I’ve set up my methodology to align with a mixed methods approach to conducting research. However, my articulation of ‘mixed methodology’ is more nontraditional and nuanced than a simple combination of quant and qual techniques. What I mean by that, is that although I am using multiple qualitative methods for my case studies, which would be considered “multiple methods” rather than “mixed methods” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), I still believe the way I’ve approached constructing and outlining my study and research concerns aligns more closely with mixed methods, despite the fact that I employ no quantitative methods. This has a great deal to do with my traditional communication studies background and training in positivist quantitative social science methodologies. Although I have moved away from positivism, as discussed in the previous chapter, I have had a hard time abandoning the structure it so often births.

When speaking to a specifically feminist articulation of mixed methods, researchers still rely heavily on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, despite the conflict

between quant's traditional positivism and qual's interpretism (Stewart & Cole, 2007). Furthermore, Stewart and Cole (2007) argue that mixing methods often happens as feminist scholars read across disciplines and are exposed to both research techniques and research questions that are unique to their 'home' disciplines. It is here that I believe my temptation to 'mix' arises – this dissertation, though housed within American Culture Studies, is one that continues my background in Communication Studies, again as discussed in the previous chapter. Stewart and Cole (2007) continue, “feminist scholars’ intellectual commitments may lend themselves to combine methods in improvisational or nonsystemic ways” (330). Again, although they are addressing the specific mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods, I believe the way I have approached this project still fits within the realm of mixed methods research. My use of mixed methods aligns more with that of Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007). In their meta-analysis of mixed methodologies, the researchers argue that mixed methods is about more than just “methods” – “but more as a methodology that spans from viewpoints to inferences... but rather as a more general combination of qualitative and quantitative research” (as cited in Creswell, 2011, p. 271).

Before I move on, I would like to address a concern that has plagued me throughout this project. At the outset of conducting my research, I constructed my preliminary research questions keeping in mind the concept of generalization. Even though I had chosen a very specific realm of digital gaming space to study, I still kept my focus on ways in which this study could inform others about similar digital spaces and digital cultures. However, this is where my project breaks from traditional mixed methodology, as, unlike researchers who follow that trajectory, I believed my questions could be addressed by a combination of feminist, qualitative methods without the addition of quantitative methods. As a result, I have had difficulty locating a

specific articulation of similar methodological constructions to those employed within this dissertation project. By and large, as alluded above, “multiple methods” is much closer to what I am doing here. However, I thought it was important to at least clarify that the glaring contrast between the ontological paradigms implied by my preliminary research questions and my methodology did not go unnoticed. Furthermore, according to Greene and Caracelli (2003), the mixing of these paradigms does not necessarily negate the overall critical feminist nature of this project. The potential disconnect between theory and practice implied by my use of typically positivist structures at the outset of my project does not impact my selection or performance of method, because “paradigm characteristics are not intrinsically bound to particular methods or techniques. Rather, methods and techniques can be crafted and used within multiple, diverse paradigmatic positions” (Greene & Caracelli, 2003, p. 107).

Triangulation and feminist multiple methods research. Triangulation is not a new form of methodological overlap in research. Some of the first uses of triangulation in the social sciences date back to the 1950s and focused solely on data triangulation (Berg, 2007). According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), triangulation is simply the use of two or more methods to collect data about the same centralized research interest. Berg (2007) believes that “[b]y combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements” (5). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) further contend that triangulation is useful because we can only “know a thing” through its representations, as objective reality doesn’t exist (5). Indeed, the primary appeal of this approach to research is that it can be used to help establish validity within qualitative studies that lack what are seen as more ‘rigorous’ (read: scientific) means of establishing credibility and reliability of methodological tools (Lindlof &

Taylor, 2011; Reinharz, 1992). Additionally, Reinharz (1992) adds that triangulation is more often employed by feminists than mainstream researchers because of its ability to address uniquely feminist concerns. Specifically, triangulation allows for “the commitment to thoroughness, the desire to be open-ended, and to take risks... to link past and present, “data gathering” and action, and individual behavior with social frameworks” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 197).

Triangulation can be achieved through the use of multiple data sources, multiple methods of data collection, or multiple researchers engaged in the same inquiry (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This project employs multiple data sources and multiple methods in order to achieve descriptive validity – “factual accuracy of reportage about events” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 276) – to support my conclusions. I engaged with multiple spheres of digital space and collected data using unique methods in an attempt to cast as wide a net as I thought applicable to this project (Reinharz, 1992). My two case studies center on a full play-through of one specific video game, online commentary from news articles and gaming-specific message forums, analyzed using visual analysis, qualitative content analysis, and participant observation. I’ll briefly explain the overlapping methods used in each case study before I move on to specifically articulate the particulars of both unique studies.

Primary Text

The game examined for the dissertation is the 2011 Deep Silver zombie-horror video game, *Dead Island* (2011), see Figure 3. I chose this game for many reasons, including both its popularity and its employment of cinematic cut scenes that provide narrative development throughout the game play experience and realistic computer graphics that enhance immersion in the game. Briefly, *Dead*



Figure 3. *Dead Island* original edition cover-art.

Island (2011) takes place on the fictional island of Banoi, just north of Australia, home of the luxury Palms Resort of the wealthy (“Game info”). The language used to describe the fictional geography of the island setting is wrought with codes that prepare the player for a mysterious location that “until very recently... was wild and primitive and totally untouched by the modern world” (“Game info”). The language employed in promotions indicates that the island’s habitat was gutted and turned into a tourist attraction, which is ravaged by a mysterious epidemic just after the player enters the gaming world timeline. An additional element that factored into choosing this game was the particular game genre into which it fit. Because this is a horror video game, it opens itself up to established horror film scholarship, which I used to build the method and in my analysis and discussion in its standalone chapter.

In addition to *Dead Island*’s (2011) popularity and employment of narrative cut scenes, this text is appealing because it is one of few survival-horror games that feature a diverse variety of playable character heroes – half of which are male and half of which are female. The four playable protagonists include: Xian Mei, a woman from China who works as a receptionist at the hotel; Sam B, a “one-hit-wonder rap star of fading fame” who was performing at the hotel; Logan Carter, a former football player from the United States vacationing on the island; and Purna, a private bodyguard to VIP clientele who previously served on the Sydney police force (“Characters”). Of the characters, there is only one clearly coded white male protagonist, which is a dramatic difference from the standard selection of playable characters in video games. Largely, if there even are options for playable characters, the majority of video game heroes tend to be white, male or both. For example, in the similar zombie-horror video game *Left 4 Dead*, there are also four playable characters: two white males, one white female, and one black male (Ocampo, 2009); and in *Resident Evil 5*, the player can choose between a white male character

and a black female character (Haynes, 2009). Furthermore, there is also no white female protagonist, a sharp contrast to horror's favorite final girl trope (Clover, 1992). Additionally, as noted previously, all four heroes survive the game together, further shattering the common idea that only one or two 'heroes' survive the standard horror plot.

Finally, I also chose this game for its ability to foster controversy that directly ties in with concerns over gender, power, and emotion in gaming culture. Shortly after the *Dead Island* (2011) release, a controversy surrounding one of Purna's skills, "Gender Wars," briefly circulated amongst online gaming news sites and forums. According to Eykemans (2011), a



Figure 4. *Dead Island: Riptide* - Zombie Bait Special Edition promotional image.

player purchased the PC version of the game, accessed the game's source code and found written code for a skill called "Feminist Whore," which previously existed for Purna.

"Feminist Whore" was the original name for Purna's finalized in-game skill, "Gender Wars" (Crecente, 2011).

The responses to the coverage of this exposure, and subsequent company apology, mirrored much of the tone I noticed in the NHL game Yahoo! Sports article comment section.

Furthermore, though not a part of this project, the sequel to *Dead Island* (2011), *Dead Island: Riptide* (2013), continued focus on and discussions about the way game creators deal with gender when they released a special edition of the game, the "Zombie Bait Edition", that included a dismembered female zombie torso as a promotional item for purchasing said edition (see Figure 4). This resulted in a renewed round of articles discussing reactions to this figure, with equally emotional comment sections (see Crecente, 2013; Good, 2013).

As a result, I used this game and the media coverage of its associated controversies to anchor my examination of the way gender, power, and emotion overlap in gaming spaces. As I

will elaborate below, I use the game itself to study visual representations of gender, as well as race, in my first case study. For the second case study, then, I used the “Feminist Whore” articles, as well as game forum discussions which mention it, to see how conversations developed around gender; with implications for studying the way power and emotion operate in online non-gaming spaces.

Offline vs. Online Data

Before I move on to discussing the individual case studies, I feel it’s important to distinguish between the different types of data I’m using – including offline and online data. A lot of the terminology used in this project can be ambiguous – for example, online, offline, the Internet, digital space, etc. My specific articulations of digital spaces, cyber culture, and the Internet were discussed in the previous chapter, so I won’t rehash those here. However, I will distinguish between my uses of online and offline data, as well as why it’s important that I used both to help build this project. According to Orgad (2009), online data can be best identified by its method of acquirement – through “virtual methodologies: methods implemented by and through the internet” (35). The complement to this type of data is offline data, obtained using offline settings. Orgad (2009) further argues that it’s becoming increasingly more difficult to conduct thorough studies of online phenomena which ignore offline data.

What complicates Orgad’s (2009) discussion is that she gives the false impression that online and offline data are easily distinguishable from one another. As Gajjala (2009) argues in her response to Orgad (2009),

[w]hen we actually scrutinize what it means to be online and to be offline, we see that they are not separable states of being in actuality – for when we are online we are simultaneously somewhere else physically as well – but we are definitely not

disembodied... We cannot really separate our being online from being offline, because online and offline are not discrete entities (61).

Problems arise when treating states of being online and offline as if they form their own distinct binary, mutually exclusive of one another (Gajjala, 2009). This can make conceptualization of digital studies extremely complicated, as the researched must pay careful attention to what conclusions they're drawing about what types of online phenomena. In this project, I believe my uses of online and offline data make no attempt to treat the two as if mutually exclusive, and I try to ensure I take the person(s) attached to screen names into consideration in my analyses.

For the purposes of my study, I used both online and offline data to help address my research concerns, because gamer culture exists both on and offline. In gaming culture, users move from online to offline settings and back again. Games can be played entirely online, entirely offline, or in a combination of the two. Furthermore, with the ever increasing convergence of media, being a gamer is about so much more than just 'playing games', it's also about engaging fellow gamers, staying up on news relevant to games, playing styles and techniques, innovations in technology, etc. And that all happens in both on- and offline settings. The offline data I collected to support my study is the play-through of the video game *Dead Island* (2011). My online data consisted of comments on online news articles and posts to gaming discussion boards. I felt that by combining these types of data collection I could get a more holistic understanding of my research concerns as they filtered through play experiences with *Dead Island* (2011).

Note on fieldwork in digital spaces. An additional layer to the discussion of online and offline data is the trouble with conducting fieldwork in digital spaces. As the Internet has exploded, as new media have expanded, so too have scholars' engagement with and desire to

study it. But with the increased desire (and need) to study these spaces comes the necessity to attempt to define best practices for doing research, and fieldwork, in digital spaces. According to Mansell (2009) the increased proliferation of new media technologies and networks opens up a new understanding of ‘everyday experiences’ as they blend on and offline worlds. In addition to the many social implications for dependency on tech and networking, what’s of interest here is the acknowledgement that research that seeks to study contemporary life essentially *has* to take place in a blend of the online and offline. As already stated, the first case study is the embracing of that offline world and the other two case studies engage with the online. The approach taken with those two falls in line with that of Hine (2009) and Kendall (2009), who recognize the complexity of online sites for use in research. More specifically:

The decision about when to start and stop, and where to go in between, is for ethnographers not made independently of the field, but is an intrinsic part of the relationship to it. A set of fieldwork boundaries is the outcome of a project, rather than its precursor. (Hine, 2009, p. 18)

She further explains that the fluidity and ambiguity of online spaces can challenge more rigid notions of ethnographic study. In her response to Hine (2009), Kendall (2009) attempts to add some clarity to the issues of digital boundaries by loosely categorizing them into the spatial, temporal, and relational boundaries guided by three spheres of influence. She identifies spatial boundaries as those concerned with the where, who, and what of the study, temporal as time spent ‘in the field’, and relational as the relationships between researcher and culture of study. The spheres of influence are broken down into analytical (theoretical/analytical decisions about project boundaries), ethical (boundaries drawn based on ethics), and personal (impact of researcher’s background on project boundaries) (Kendall, 2009, p. 22). The manner in which I

have approached site and procedure establishment for the two case studies in this dissertation adheres to both Hine's (2009) and Kendall's (2009) soft guidelines for conducting research in online spaces.

Chapter IV: Case Study I Methodology

In order to truly do justice to this dissertation project, I felt it was important to completely immerse myself in the game I used as my central artifact (McMahan, 2003).⁸ Authenticity is extremely important within the gaming community, and as person who at times claims that identity I would feel fraudulent making judgments or claims about a game or associated community without ever having played it myself. I began my research with this project, in which I personally played and analyzed the video game *Dead Island* (2011). This study lays the groundwork for the remainder of my dissertation project, because it helps to establish a better context for the comments and conversations surrounding gameplay and in-group communications. As stated, in this case study, I fully played the game, as well as reviewed online videos of the game cut scenes, and employed visual analysis in my examination of gameplay and emergent themes. Throughout this section, I will discuss and establish the fit for my chosen methodology, as well as detail the site and procedure involved in this specific case study.

Evolution of Method – Visual Cultural Analysis

I refer to the process I follow for this case study as an “evolution of method”, because visual cultural analysis (VCA; my intended method) actually did evolve over time out of a long tradition of textual analysis. It could be said that VCA is a subset of textual analysis, but I believe the manner in which the visual can take such precedent in media-centered study sets it

⁸ According to McMahan (2003) occurs when “the player is caught up in the world of the game’s story... but it also refers to the player’s love of the game and the strategy that goes into it” (68). By gaining my own appreciation of the game, I had a better, more personal connection to the artifacts I studied.

apart from the ‘texts’ used in textual analysis. According to Hartley (2011), textual analysis grew out of literary fields, as the original texts of study were bounded by the written form on pages, scrolls, and stone. As media evolved, so too did the manner in which textual analysis could be used as a method. As such, Gomm (2009) defines textual analysis as a “general term covering the wide range of analytic approaches to *texts*, including content analysis, frame analysis, narrative analysis, membership category analysis, rhetorical analysis, semiology/semiotics, textual criticism and textual interaction” (360, emphasis modified). By and large, most media can be considered text and as a result lend themselves to textual analysis, leaving this method of particular use within cultural and media studies to understand possible interpretations of said texts. However, unlike ethnography, used heavily throughout the subsequent two case studies, textual analysis is not used for understanding social context (Hartley, 2011). Visual analysis, then, grew out of image-based media, such as art, photography, and film, as well as visual anthropology (Pink, 2007, 2008). Within the field of cultural studies, this method has been focused on “interpreting existing images and objects and the social and cultural conditions within which they are produced, rather than on how images and their production form part of ethnographic practices” (Pink, 2007, p. 14). Though certainly many scholars would say ‘hey, those are also texts’, I still think the textual and the visual have grown far enough apart at this point that the two have formed distinct fields of inquiry.

For Pink (2012), distinctly visual methodology cannot be separated from the theory and technology it seeks to address. This field of inquiry is ever changing as it adapts to new technologies and the theories that seek to address them. Therefore, arguably, when scholarship focuses on or around particular technological advances or uses of new media, visual methods are not only the most applicable, but they may be the only choice. Extending this further then, is the

introduction of visual cultural studies, defined in part by Lister and Wells (2001) and discussed more thoroughly in the theory section. According to Nakamura (2008), this provides “a powerful methodology for parsing gender and racial and ethnic identity in these digital signifying practices that became so prominent at the turn of the century (5).

According to Rose (2012), there are three key criteria for constructing a critical visual methodology. First and foremost, this approach to visual culture “takes images seriously... it is necessary to look very carefully at visual images, and it is necessary to do so because they are not entirely reducible to their context. Visual representations have their own effects” (Rose, 2012, p. 16). Second, this approach considers the social elements of the visual objects – the conditions and effects. And, third, this approach also requires the researcher to consider their own way of looking at images. Rose (2012) argues that this is what makes a critical visual method distinct from other ways of analyzing visuals – researcher reflexivity. This is especially relevant within the study of video games because each of those three requirements are so crucial to gaining a full understanding of the gaming context. By playing through the game, the researcher is immersed and able to take the visuals seriously, through play, consider the social elements, through engagement, and be reflexive in an almost immediate way, as they are the ones playing the game.

I fully agree with Pink (2012) that it is very hard to disentangle theory, technology, and method from performing a visual study. As such, this discussion of method is somewhat sparse, as a great deal more of this discussion takes place where appropriate in the theory and standalone analysis chapters. In particular, as I perform my visual analysis of *Dead Island* (2011), described next, I further weave in discussions of visual culture as well as the many ways in which others disciplines have approached visual analysis – in particular, film theorists. Now that I have

established the methods I am using for this case study, I'll move on to more specifically discuss the site and basic procedure that will serve as a prelude to the more expansive fourth chapter.

Site

As previously explained, the research site for this case study is the 2011 Deep Silver zombie-horror video game, *Dead Island* (2011). There is one primary storyline that runs throughout the game, with the option of choosing one of four playable characters through which to experience it. No matter which character the player chooses, the main storyline remains unchanged. To get the most complete understanding of the game, as well as the controversy surrounding it, I played through as the character around whom it surrounds, Purna. I own a PlayStation 3 gaming console, so I first rented the game and then purchased a used copy for the case study.⁹

Artifact contextualization. An important part of any media project is fully articulating the reason why certain media artifacts are chosen above others, as well as the particular genre from which it comes. As stated above, I selected my game based on a combination of popularity and controversy/news presence, and also on the style of gameplay. *Dead Island* (2011) is a survival-horror role-playing game (RPG) with first-person shooter (FPS) elements and cinematic cut scenes, which drives narrative development and character/story involvement. The filmic aspects of the game were very important to this particular chapter, because I believe it is not just the physical playing of the game that is important to gamer involvement, but actual investment in a playable-character's development and story: gamers need to actually 'care' about their characters. In his analysis of the *Silent Hill* video game series, Kirkland (2005) explains "despite

⁹ My first experiences with playing the game were purely recreational, as I had a personal interest in the game. I then purchased the game after I decided to construct my dissertation around it.

the game's undoubted interactivity, in presenting players with a single pathway, frequently contingent upon completing particular actions, game progress is structured to produce a specific game story" (p. 171). While the nature of video games establishes a somewhat disjointed and often interrupted story progression, he argues that the story does progress nonetheless, and that meaningful characters can be established to move the narrative forward. Because of this, survival-horror video games can create spaces where players form attachments to the narrative and characters of the game in a similar manner that film audiences do.¹⁰ Moreover, Krzywinska (2002) analyzes the interactivity and action-based play and learning associated with horror video games, and uses this to contrast video games from filmic horror. Throughout her argument, Krzywinska (2002) discusses cinematic conventions employed by survival horror games (such as *Resident Evil 3* and *Undying*) and the impact a consistent avatar first-person point of view has on the game and story evolution. Ultimately, her argument is that survival horror video game play differs significantly from horror films due to the active role taken by the player in the story's narrative – an audience member is never as fully in the hero's position as a game-player is in the avatar's (Krzywinska, 2002, p. 19).

Furthermore, in his discussion of Bolter and Grusin's new media concept of "remediation,"¹¹ Kirkland (2007) argues that the mix of self-reflexivity and textuality in the evolution of video games has implications for creating effective emotional responses in players (p. 408). Kirkland (2005) also describes the differences between video game genre types and the impact that has on the structure of in-game scenes with regard to identity and representation (p.

¹⁰ While Kirkland is speaking specifically about survival-horror in his research, I argue that the construction of that genre in comparison to the global genre of RPGs means his conclusions also apply to other, similarly constructed RPGs which may or may not include horror themes.

¹¹ "The manner in which new media deploy, refashion and reflect upon the processes of both traditional media and themselves" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, as cited in Kirkland, 2007, p. 408).

171). For example, professional sports games (e.g., NFL) are modeled from live televised sporting events and real-life players in those respective leagues, while action and adventure games rely more on narrative and cinematic tactics to propel a game forward (Kirkland, 2005, p. 171). Therefore, the visual and audio elements of survival-horror video games tend to reflect the film camera's panning and tracking of characters on the screen.

As previously mentioned, not only are the employment of cinematic cut scenes integral to my project, but publicized controversy and fan reaction are important as well. If I were only interested in sales figures, there are any number of games I could have used for this project. However, by also focusing on which games garner significantly positive or significantly negative discussions in game-related non-gameplaying contexts (e.g., on message boards, in gaming magazines, in comment threads), I am also able to continue with my discussion of the multi-platform convergence of gaming spaces. This is ultimately why I chose to analyze *Dead Island* (2011), a popular survival-horror video game (and now franchise), because the game not only garnered both a sequel and a battle for film rights (McNary, 2011), but was also part of anti-feminist and anti-female media controversies.¹² *Dead Island* is significantly representative of poorly executed gender and racial gaming tropes, and almost *begs* for a deep analysis to explore what impact they may have on its millions of fans/players.

Procedure

As stated, the purpose of this case study is to inform future ones – specifically the piece of this dissertation which seeks to understand how gamers interact with the actual game I analyzed in this chapter. More broadly constructed research questions guide my analysis in this case study. What is gameplay like in *Dead Island* (2011) as Purna? What is Purna's character,

¹² *Dead Island* sold over four million copies worldwide combined on PC, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360 consoles (VGChartz.com, 2014a, 2014b).

visually, like? How does Purna's performance in *Dead Island* (2011) convey gender and race? As previously stated, the remaining case study also focuses entirely around *Dead Island* (2011), so my direct understanding of the gameplay allows me to better interpret and analyze the data collected in subsequent parts of this study.

Overall, the procedure followed here was adapted from established game studies that have examined both the RPG video game genre and also cinematic components of the game (e.g., Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dill & Thill, 2007; Krzywinska, 2002; Robinson, et al., 2009). In particular, Kirkland's (2005, 2007, 2010) work with the *Silent Hill* video game series was particularly relevant in helping to guide this procedure. Kirkland (2005, 2007, 2010) employed textual analysis and personally played through his games to aid his analysis and understanding of immersion, horror film and game overlap, amongst his other research concerns. I have also relied on Nakamura's *Digitizing Race* (2008) and Pink's (2007) *Doing Visual Ethnography*, in part, for discussions of video analysis, which I have adapted to analyzing the cinematic cut-scenes within the games. Additionally, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) and Boellstorff et al. (2012) provide guidelines for developing categories and codes when conducting qualitative communication research that were useful when attempting to manage the dialogue and nonverbal actions of the characters (pp. 246-248). And so, it is through the use of *Dead Island* (2011) cut scenes, in-game play, action and dialogue, as well as textual clues, that the game was analyzed for gendered and racialized representations of the hero characters, as well as specifically of Purna.

I began with a careful play-through of *Dead Island* (2011) as Purna, I stuck with the main storyline as best I could with the use of online guides and wikis to prevent too much unnecessary sidequesting. Throughout gameplay, I would either pause to take notes when there was a lull in the game or jot down notes when I had quit for that session. At times, I also used a voice-

activated recorder to keep track of my thoughts and reactions without stopping the game. I only used this for a brief period, however, as it proved more troublesome than simply pausing the game to physically write down my notes. In addition to playing through the game, I also rewatched compilations of the *Dead Island* (2011) cut scenes on YouTube so that I was better able to watch for nuance in a more focused and static environment. That is, when viewing the cut-scenes within gameplay, it was not possible to pause or restart the scenes if I missed dialogue or didn't see what one particular main or side character was doing. By rewatching these scenes in a different setting, I could more carefully analyze these aspects of the game. For the sake of consistency, I viewed cutscene/walkthrough videos from the same YouTube user, MrRepzion, all posted throughout September 2011 (see Appendix A for citations of these videos). Although the videos contained commentary and gameplay, I focused solely on the cutscenes for my analysis. The complete analysis and discussion of this case study is in chapter four of this dissertation.

Chapter V: Case Study II Methodology

In this chapter, I completed the more complex and complicated case study I used to support my argument about the role emotion plays in online gaming settings. This study seeks to address the online non-gameplaying sphere of the contemporary gaming experience – that of the online comment section. This study represents the culmination of various overlapping spheres of a fully convergent gaming experience – the actual gameplay, online fandom, and personal, emotional reaction to it. Online comment sections are the primary area in which I wanted to study cultural development and reinforcement of gamers and gamer identity. In this case study, I performed a qualitative content analysis, which borrows elements from online ethnography as a digital method, to examine a collection of comment sections from gaming news articles and online forums. This space represents an incredibly murky ground for academic research with a

great many unanswerable and changing ethical considerations. Throughout this section, I will discuss and establish the fit for my chosen methodology, as well as detail the site and procedure analysis involved in this specific case study.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Content analysis (CA) is the “systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics,” as defined by Neuendorf (2002) in her pivotal guidebook for performing the method. CA is traditionally a method used in communication sciences by quantitative researchers looking to study human interactions in some way. Communication scholars, sociologists, historians, journalists, speech pathologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and others have used CA to this end (Neuendorf, 2002; Reinharz, 1992). Some of its most basic requirements are that researchers who employ the method do so by using the scientific method to count the occurrence of a set unit of analysis through an established and tested codebook. Although CA is well recognized as a quantitative measure, it has been adapted to fit more critical, qualitative research as well. For example, queen-bee of CA Neuendorf (2002) herself, though she describes some as “frivolous”, also acknowledges the existence of various alternative forms of research methods for analyzing message content, including rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, structuralist or semiotic analysis, interpretive analysis, conversation analysis, critical analysis, and normative analysis (5-8).

An additional take on performing CA is through a feminist lens to study “the gendered and sexualized discourses inherent in cultural content, including the conditions of production and systems of interpretation” (Reinharz & Kulick, 2007, p. 260). Feminists use the method to study any number of cultural artifacts. According to Reinharz (1992), “[t]he only limit to what can be considered a cultural artifact – and thus used as a “text” for research – is the researcher’s

imagination” (146). Cultural artifacts themselves must contain two set properties: (1) they have a “found” quality, in that they are natural and not created for the study; and (2) they are “noninteractive”, as they do not rely on others’ responses or behaviors (Reinharz, 1992). So far, there is nothing inherently ‘feminist’ about this method, so what makes this performance of CA feminist then is the way these artifacts are categorized and interpreted. More specifically, that would be the analysis of written records, narratives and visual texts, material culture, and behavioral residues as they fall into gendered categorization and result in feminist interpretation within a larger cultural context (Reinharz, 1992; Reinharz & Kulick, 2007). Furthermore, Reinharz and Kulick (2007) add that intersectionality plays a key role in feminist CA, specifically through the “interlocking social forces [such] as sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, and so forth” (260).

Of focus in this case study, however, is the use of the qualitative adaptation of CA, quite appropriately referred to as qualitative content analysis (QCA), applied through a feminist lens in the manner defined by Reinharz (1992) and Reinharz and Kulick (2007). According to Schreier (2012), QCA overlaps quite a bit with quantitative CA (quantCA), as it is also “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. It is done by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame” (1). However, what does distinguish QCA from quantCA is the flexibility with which data is handled, the focus on latent (over manifest) meaning, and the variability in conducting the method (Schreier, 2012). QCA works well for critical feminist analysis of media artifacts because it can be applied interpretively, concerned with social/personal meaning, and subjectively, considering context of the messages. QCA overlaps with various other critical methods, such as discourse analysis and the study of

semiotics, but this method is most appropriate for my purposes because my focus in this case study will be on “what is there in the material” (Schreier, 2012).

According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), there are eight basic steps to QCA: (1) prepare the data; (2) define the unit of analysis; (3) develop categories and a coding scheme; (4) test your coding scheme on a sample of text; (5) code all the text; (6) assess your coding consistency; (7) draw conclusions from the coded data; and (8) report your methods and findings (3-5). For my project, the first two steps are rather straightforward – by analyzing text in digital spaces the data is essentially “prepared” with the separate comments forming the individual units of analysis. The third step is the most crucial in this process, however, as it can be approached from three different directions. The main categories (or dimensions) can be developed using previous studies/theory/experience/knowledge (concept-driven), the data (data-driven), or by combining the previous two (Schreier, 2012; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Data-driven categories are inductive and best used when the researcher wants to describe the material in depth. No matter which approach is taken to develop the categories, they must all be unidimensional (only capturing one aspect of the material), mutually exclusive (can be assigned on only one subcategory), and achieve saturation (no subcategory goes unused) (Schreier, 2012; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

The final half of the steps involve consistent reflection and assessment of the fit of the coding scheme with the content. Much like quantCA, the coding scheme must be tested against a sample of the data before broader analysis, but that doesn’t render the coding scheme infallible. In particular, with the use of data-driven categorization, reassessment of the coding fit with the data occurs throughout analysis. Furthermore, as Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) point out, “human coders are subject to fatigue and are likely to make more mistakes as the coding

proceeds [and n]ew codes may have been added since the original consistency check” (5). Once saturation has been reached, however, conclusions can be drawn about the data and a final analysis and discussion of the findings close out the QCA process. It’s important to be sure a balance between description of the data and interpretation of the findings is achieved. Though QCA is a fundamentally interpretive method, it’s important to make sure the discussion is grounded in context so that readers fully understand the study.

Ethnography – Participant Observation

In conducting my content analysis of the text on the comment sections and discussion forums of my sites, I borrowed heavily from ethnography – and participant observation – to build my concept-driven coding frame as well as reflect on the data. At its most basic, ethnography is the “description (graphy) of cultures (cultures)” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 69). It grew out of anthropological study of ‘exotic’ culture and involves the study of a group from the inside (Gomm, 2009; Hartley, 2011). Ethnography has been used to examine a vast array of cultural topics, including: bodybuilding (Monaghan, 2001), surveillance in everyday life (Green & Zurawski, 2015), crime and criminal culture (Taylor, 1993), bedside nurses (Mahon & McPherson, 2014), endocrinologists at the Salk Institute (Latour & Woolgar, 1986), children’s experiences with cancer (Rindstedt, 2014), and countless more. Indeed, this methodological approach to understanding culture has been adapted by many disciplines, finding a rather fitting place within feminist and cultural studies. Furthermore, from the communication perspective, this has expanded into attempts to understand media audiences (Hartley, 2011, p. 108). Although ethnography is conducted in a number of different disciplines and to a number of different ends, there are three primary methodological commitments that are universal to its employment (Bloor & Wood, 2006). First, there is an emphasis on immersion in ethnographic research – the person

(or group) conducting the study must attempt to occupy the perspective of members of the social group in question. Second, normal and naturalistic enquiry should take place so as to not disturb or interfere with the social group. And, third, ethnography “recognizes the relativistic status of knowledge in which there is no one objective reality but rather a number of realities” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 70). Ethnography is conducted actively, research questions are formed loosely at the outset with room for adaptation as further research is conducted.

One of the primary means of conducting ethnography – and the one employed here – is that of observation, or more specifically, participant observation. Observation allows ethnographers the chance to realize two of the main goals of the methodology – immersion and naturalistic enquiry. Much like ethnography itself, there is more than one way to approach observation. According to Bloor & Wood (2006), observation techniques fall along a spectrum including complete participant, participant observer, observer participant, and complete observer. Angrosino and Rosenberg (2011) expand on these roles, explaining that they grow out of sociological traditions of participant observation, and that the complete participant is often seen as too subjective (and therefore problematic) while the complete observer was seen as unethical as they usually conducted observation without informed consent. As a result, it is most common that ethnographers fall somewhere in the middle, carefully balancing their roles as participant and observer.

Much like ethnography as a whole, participant observation can vary in its implementation – particularly given the discipline within which it is being used. Angrosino and Rosenberg (2011) identify three basic steps to participant observation: (1) descriptive observation – “the observation of every conceivable aspect of the [research] situation”; (2) focused observation – weeding out the relevant to the irrelevant; and (3) selective observation – where ethnographers

“could concentrate on the elements of social action that are most salient, presumably from the “native” point of view” (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 468). A major factor in observation-based research is the manner in which the researcher attempts to study their subject from the inside out, but also acknowledge the ways in which they could be effecting said observations through critical self-reflection. The exchange “between the researcher and the research subjects is the medium that assists the transformation of ideas and thoughts into the words and activities recorded” (Nightingale, 2008, p. 105).

Now that I’ve given a very basic overview of ethnographic participant observation, I will move on to the manner in which I see myself employing it in this specific case study. As stated previously, as new media have developed, so too have subcultures that utilize these media in very specific and targeted ways. As a result, many researchers have begun to recognize the importance of conducting their studies where these cultures are most active – online.

If they so choose, ethnographers can free themselves of “place” by means of the Internet – the “location” for so many of the most interesting communities on the contemporary scene. Virtual communities are characterized not by geographic proximity or long-established ties of heritage, but by computer-mediated communication and online interaction.¹³ They are “communities of interest” rather than communities of residence.

(Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 473)

As this dissertation project is one most centrally about the development and conduct of a culture that conducts itself digitally, it is only common sense that much of my research would focus on

¹³ Though used interchangeably in a lot of places, I prefer the terms digital and cyber to describe online culture as opposed to virtual. I only use “virtual” when in a direct quote or established terminology.

behavior in digital spaces. To that end, the methods employed in this case study falls within the evolving realm of virtual methodology.

I have used two texts quite heavily to help guide my specific interpretation of the way ethnography – and participant observation – are conducted in online spaces. Boellstorff's (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life* and Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor's (2012) *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* both make clear that what often clouds understanding of online ethnography is the way people misconstrue 'virtual worlds'. Boellstorff (2008) makes it clear that the manner in which an ethnographic study is carried out in a non-virtual setting is very similar to the way it is carried out in them. Boellstorff et al. (2012) further argue that ethnographic methodologies "translat[e] elegantly and fluidly to virtual worlds" and identify themselves as ethnographers who work in virtual worlds, not as "virtual ethnographers" (4). In fact, Boellstorff (2008) identifies one of the more fundamental differences as the ease with which digital data can be captured in comparison to way offline data is obtained in non-virtual ethnography – both a blessing and a curse. As such, save for a few safeguards about working in digital places, their handbook mirrors most articulations of non-virtual ways of conducting ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Now that I have established the methods I am using for this chapter, I'll move on to more specifically discuss the site and basic procedure that will serve as a prelude to the more expansive fifth chapter.

Site

When selecting sites for this chapter, I based the process on preliminary work I did when conducting similar exploratory studies for different projects on comment sections as well as an initial pilot study I conducted using participant observation of other gaming forums. For pilot study, the sites I chose were Nintendo Wii U message boards on the website GameFAQs.com, a

member site of CBS Interactive (GameFAQs). I chose the GameFAQs site itself because I am familiar with its set-up and find the boards and messaging system easy to navigate. While this is a site with membership options, being a member is not a requirement for navigating it and this allowed for my ability to "lurk" the boards and conduct my observations without interaction or detection (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).¹⁴ I felt confident in my ability to choose appropriate sites for this based on said previous work (which will be discussed more thoroughly in the standalone chapter). I had two primary criteria for finding sites to include in this case study: (1) the articles or forums had to relate to the *Dead Island* (2011) "Feminist Whore" controversy in some way; and (2) there needed to be at least 10 or more unique comments on the article, or four or more unique posts for message forums.

For articles, I began with the pop news articles I had originally cited in my discussion of my central artifact. From there, I used "online traces" by following embedded links within those original articles to begin my expansion (Hine, 2009). Finally, I conducted searches for relevant articles through an expansive Internet search. After conducting said search, I chose to include YouTube videos with open comment sections as well, opting to include only those videos which operated in a similar manner to news videos or established gaming vlogs. For the gaming forums, I started looking for forums on the site I used in my pilot study, GameFAQs, but found additional forums and hosting sites through a Google search for the video game title. Once I found sites that hosted discussion forums for this specific game, I narrowed down discussions to boards specifically geared toward *Dead Island* (2011) and then specific boards relevant to my topic from there. To accomplish this, I did a key word search for the terms: Purna, feminist,

¹⁴ For the sake of full disclosure, I am a member of the GameFAQs site, but did not sign in to complete this portion of the study.

feminist whore, whore, wh0re,¹⁵ gender, gender wars, woman, and girl. When forums were divided by game version, I made sure to look across gaming system platforms (i.e., PS3, Xbox, PC, and Mac) to ensure full coverage of the subject. I then narrowed down my sites based on the first two criteria – I eliminated those that did not mention the “Feminist Whore” controversy and those that had fewer than 10 comments or four posts. I further narrowed by removed any sites that were about different versions of *Dead Island* (2011) than the one I played and was examining.

This resulted in seven total unique articles and YouTube videos with substantive comment sections, and five total unique message forum topics with a minimum of three to four interactions beyond the topic creator’s initial post. The specific breakdown of these sites includes: five news articles from five different sources, two YouTube videos, and approximately 1800 comments, ranging from 13 to 731 responses per article (see Appendix B for a complete list of articles). The news articles came from sites that are specifically video game centered. For the message boards, I decided to stick specifically with two main sources – GameFAQs, the broad gaming site I utilized for my pilot study, and DeadIslandForums, specifically tailored to discussing the *Dead Island* franchise. The specific breakdown of these forums includes: four GameFAQs and one DeadIslandForums, with approximately 90 posts from as few as four to as many 49 responses across them (see Appendix B for complete list of forums).

For each, membership of some sort is required for commenting on articles or for starting or commenting on forum boards – this was either through the site itself or through what could be considered a more ‘globalized’ log-in (such as Google or Facebook). However, membership is not a requirement for reading the articles, the comment sections, or the boards, thus allowing for

¹⁵ I found that this was one of the ways in which users avoided being censored by site bots (automatic algorithms used to check for profanity or vulgarity).

ease of access to both. Some comment sections were archived and no longer able to be posted to, but many others were still active. However, because I am only focusing on the first game in the *Dead Island* series, every site is several years old with the last active comments from that time frame. This corresponds directly with the height of the popularity of the initial release of the game – 2011-2012 – and is very similar to what I ran into with the third case study. I was only interested in studying these comments from a content analysis perspective, so engaging in discussion or commenting on the articles was never a concern for me.

Procedure

My method for this case study followed closely with Schreier's (2012) articulation of qualitative content analysis, while the participant observation influences followed a procedure I developed in a pilot study for a research methods course. Preliminary concerns from the early stages of my research helped to build the main categories of my coding frame. Specifically, I examined the predominant themes in the comment sections of video game related articles; sexist or misogynistic comments and whether they were characteristic of the comment sections of video game related articles; the manner in which self-proclaimed gamers interacted in online non-gaming settings; and how they may build and reinforce gamer culture through these spaces and interactions.

As stated previously, when I began site selection for this case study, it was based on my previous work with exploring comment sections of online news articles for different studies. As a result, I approached my coding frame using concept-driven strategies that grew out of my knowledge of the interactions between commenters that I had observed previously (Schreier, 2012). Part of the way I approached this part of the project was to settle on the way I was going to define certain terms, and try to maintain those throughout this case study. Because these

comment sections and forums are very hobby and game specific, I would argue that they attract posters who would self-identify as gamers. I felt secure in assuming ‘gamer status’ of these posters because of the effort they had to go through to not only find the boards and articles, but become members of the sites in order to participate. Furthermore, (when I could) I inferred sex of the commenter based on the handle under which they posted – which, again, certainly has drawbacks that I will discuss later.

As I stated above, I performed a qualitative content analysis (QCA), borrowing elements from online ethnography and participant observation, to examine the themes in various online comment sections on articles specifically about my chosen artifact. In keeping with my triangulation of methods, it’s important to keep a centralized focus – and for the purposes of this dissertation that focus has taken for the form of the video game, *Dead Island*. The reactions I discussed previously (and reiterated throughout this dissertation) to the female NHL avatar, the plethora of abuse put up with by Sarkeesian, and the many examples from GamerGate demonstrate that the presence of a female body (or bodily imagery) does seem to affect those interacting in those spaces. For an analysis of these spaces and the reality of this situation outside of my preliminary analyses, I believe my combination of QCA and online ethnography is the most appropriate method to fully examine the way people in online non-gaming spaces communicate about various topics. The actual imagery of the female video game character is often removed in these contexts, and what remains are discussions amongst people that either focus on the female body in theory, or involve a female-bodied or pro-feminist identified person on one end of the dialogue. Examining various video game related popular news pieces, blogs, and YouTube videos will address the previously mentioned research concerns.

As I discussed above, because ethnographic observation in online settings can be complicated, I closely followed the advice given by Lindlof and Taylor (2011) to manage my position as a complete observer (as per Gold's typology) while also respecting the virtual boundaries of those I planned to observe (as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 148). I also closely constructed my ethnography based on the Boellstorff et al (2012) handbook that I previously discussed. In keeping with the complete observer role, I did not interact with any of the board participants, or engage the topics, and simply read and followed along with the conversations as they had originally developed.

Case study coding frame. The sites I have chosen for this chapter are online articles and response videos related to *Dead Island* from several outlets including IGN, Kotaku, and YouTube. I have taken a deductive approach to the creation of my coding frame – drawing both from previous research and from theory to construct my categories and subcategories (Schreier, 2012). Though this runs counter to Schreier's (2012) articulation of QCA, I constructed my coding frame in a somewhat more open way and I did not use any additional coders. I felt that this left room for more fluid discussion of my findings and a closer alignment with the feminist content analysis ideal of studying both texts that exist and those that do not within the data (Reinharz, 1992). My coding frame is derived from the time I have spent doing preliminary analyses of other comment sections (those highlighted above) and those quoted throughout the literature on GamerGate. The theory-driven components of my coding frame are inspired by Järvinen's (2009) examination of emotional experience in gameplay. My units of analysis were simply each individual comment.

Online ethnographic influence. One of the other reasons I used a more open coding system for this case study was that I employed elements of online ethnography as I performed

my QCA. My main motivation for employing online ethnography in the form of participant observation is that I wanted to read through and code my data on my own, without the use of computerized assistance or reliance on independent coders, as per strict quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). This grew out of my experiences with quantitative content analysis for my master's thesis project. While this worked well (I have my MA, after all), I didn't care for the way I was so far removed from my cultural artifacts. I'm the one invested in this project, I'm the one with the burning desire to see what's happening in these *Dead Island* article comment sections and gaming forums – so why wouldn't I be the one to find out, firsthand?

The three methodological commitments of ethnography drove my desire to blend this within my employment of QCA. To review, first is an emphasis on immersion in ethnographic research – the person (or group) conducting the study must attempt to occupy the perspective of members of the social group in question. Second, normal and naturalistic enquiry should take place so as to not disturb or interfere with the social group. Moreover, third, ethnography “recognizes the relativistic status of knowledge in which there is no one objective reality but rather a number of realities” (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 70). By playing through *Dead Island* before attempting this case study, I sought to achieve as close a level of immersion in this part of my project as I could conceivably accomplish. Then, by conducting my QCA with essentially archived conversations, I sought further to adhere to these methodological tenets through naturalistic, unobtrusive ‘lurking’. Finally, it should be quite clear by now that I maintain no illusions as to any level of objectivity in this dissertation.

Concept-driven coding from previous research and theory. According to Schreier (2012), concept-driven coding frames are created deductively based on what would be appropriate categories and subcategories out of what the researcher knows about previous

research, everyday experience, or logic. The main categories I created were also based on those used by Järvinen (2009) in his research. The codes I borrowed from Järvinen (2009) include: Article Association (agreement or disagreement), Fortunes-of-Others Emotions (good-will or ill-will emotions), Attraction Emotions (liking or disliking), Well-being Emotions (basic association with desirable or undesirable events), and Innocuous Response (random comment or question for the sake of conversation).

While I was certainly focused on comments that would hint at gamer identity, emotional engagement with the characters or game, and gendered stereotypes, I also began coding for any other kind of communication, specifically those that I noted in my pilot study, as well. The themes I observed in the pilot study were: Antagonism or confrontation, Agreement (with either the poll or another user's comments), Compliments (usually to another user), Messages used to establish credibility (this was typically either of themselves, as a gamer, or of their information), Disagreement (with either the poll or another user's comments), Support (ambiguous support offered after an opinion), Topic Reminders (either to get back on topic or that something is simply off topic), Original Opinions (usually reserved for early board comments that generate discussion), and Defensive statements.

My coding frame. The final coding frame, then, reflected a combination of emotionally driven coding categories and those I drew from my pilot study. As a result, I had three main categories: Article Association, Well-Being Emotions, and Innocuous Response; and four subcategories: Antagonism or Confrontation, Fortunes-of-Others Emotions, Messages used to establish Credibility, Defensive Statements (see Appendix C for my coding frame). Within each of those, then, is the further subcategorization of positive or negative emotion, assessment of overall level of prejudice (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, intersectional), and calls to political

correctness. Again, I preferred to maintain a more fluid and somewhat broad coding frame because I was attempting to manage a rather large data set that I wanted to code myself, without computerized aid, as discussed previously.

The Next Two Chapters

I chose to explain my methodological influences, as well as evolving use of method, in this standalone chapter for multiple reasons. First, I felt that it was important to build up to my chosen method with as much detail as possible. I am bridging multiple disciplines, with distinctly preferred methods, and without explaining that I felt as if I'd be jumping into the middle of my project. Second, this build-up allowed me to better articulate the effectiveness of two case studies using visual and digital methods to better understand the way gender, power, and emotion play out in gaming spaces. Now that I have thoroughly traced my methodological trajectory and the manner in which each case study is constructed in this dissertation, I will move on to the standalone case study chapters. The next chapter contains the visual analysis of *Dead Island* (2011) and the chapter following it, the examination of user commentary surrounding the "Feminist Whore" skill controversy.

CHAPTER IV – THE IMPORTANCE OF IMMERSION THROUGH FIRSTHAND CRITICAL, FEMINIST VIDEOGAME PLAYING FOR VISUAL ANALYSIS WITHIN GAMING STUDIES

I hate rich assholes, which is fucking ironic since I'm expected to put my bloody life on the line for them. That's what they pay me for... I used to be a cop. A bloody good one. A vice detective in Sydney. You know how many female half-Aborigine detectives there were before me? None. You think it was easy suffering the abuse of my so-called colleagues? Half of 'em hated me because I was a girl and the other half didn't like the fact that my mum was a Koori. So I came up the hard way: I busted my ass. It took me twelve years to make detective and that still wasn't enough. It's an old boys' club, you know. The whole justice system is a fucking joke. Teenage drug addicts get put away forever and old white wankers who steal fucking millions get away scot-free. (Purna's character intro, *Dead Island*, 2011)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on a thorough, firsthand experience with playing through one specific video game for the purpose of deep, multi-layered gaming analysis. To review, the game examined in this chapter is the 2011 Deep Silver zombie-horror video game, *Dead Island* (Fernandez, 2011, p. 32), see game logo, Figure 5. I chose this game for both its popularity and its employment of cinematic cut scenes that provide narrative development throughout the game play experience and realistic computer graphics that enhance immersion in the game. I also chose this game for its ability to foster controversy that directly ties in with concerns over gender, power, and emotion in gaming culture.



Figure 5. *Dead Island* game logo. An island victim is shown hanging from a tree, symbolizing the horror-genre aspect of the series.

There are a number of ways in which *Dead Island* (2011) could be analyzed, and a multitude of themes that emerged in preliminary analysis. Traditionally, as a film genre, zombie horror is wrought with societal criticism that can range from critiques of capitalism to involvement in war or foreign occupation, which *Dead Island* (2011) certainly pays tribute to (Grant, 1996, p. 202). Additionally, the gendered and racialized representations of the characters

in the game alone could also birth multiple research projects. For example, the portrayal of black masculinity through Sam B's character is arguably the most problematic of the four. However, the primary focus here is on the four hero characters and the manner in which they compose a 'team'. This chapter proposes to address the central argument using a two-part analysis: first, to address the dynamic created by a quartet of horror protagonists, a comparison of the four hero characters from *Dead Island* (2011) will be conducted using in-game play and other game informational sources. Second, a more in-depth analysis of one playable protagonist character, Purna, will evaluate the representation of one of the two othered women in this survival-horror narrative. Among other reasons, this is because Purna's character has been further developed than Xian Mei's, as will be discussed below.

Before delving deeper into this chapter, it's first important to flesh out the motivations for structuring my project this way, as well as grounding it in existing video game scholarship. The vast majority of video game theory literature has fallen into one of two prevailing sites: research focusing on the in-game portrayals and representations of characters and action, or research focusing on the interaction between gamers and their games. In H. Thornham's (2011) book, *Ethnographies of the Videogame*, she reinforces my observations about the two major forms of video game theory research. In particular, she argues that the primary focus of video game literature is on either what the video game 'offers' to or what it 'does' to the gamer (Thornham, H., 2011). Research centering on what a video game 'offers' most often includes work highlighting character and action portrayals, but is most significantly characterized by the complete removal of the gamer from research projects. For example, a project that only examines a video game for its art, story, character portrayal, mechanics, or employment of certain technology would fall into this category. It examines the game and its content, but not

necessarily how the gamer may interact with any of it. Alternatively, research focusing on what a game ‘does’ to a gamer, focuses primarily on the manner in which the gamer can be affected or effected by the game. That is, this research highlights potential media effects from video gameplay, which can be either positive or negative, regardless of the actual game in question. These projects rely heavily on previous analyses or discussions of the video games in their studies, or information about games that can be gleaned from their subjects’ responses.

However, very few studies (if any) employ both of these tactics within the same project. By only engaging in one of these two research agendas, a significant disconnect develops within video game scholarship. A thorough, firsthand examination of video game content is crucial to the discussion of gamer interaction and culture, thus this chapter focuses on just that. I can read as many summaries and reviews and watch as many trailers of the games I would like to research as I want, but I’ll never fully understand the gaming experience without engaging in play myself. The end goal of this chapter is to use specific in-game analysis of *Dead Island* (2011) to help inform the remaining parts of this dissertation. Furthermore, it is not only useful to complete the in-game analyses early in my research project, but playing the game to completion also enhanced my understanding of comments and references to in-game content while I conducted the second case study. And while there will not be as explicitly stated an involvement of feminist theory in this chapter, my entire dissertation project has been conducted from a feminist perspective – here that takes the form of the literature I gravitate toward, as well as my primary focus on game selection and visual analysis. Before I move on to discussing those texts and briefly reiterate my methodology, I will next discuss relevant literature that informs this type of video game research project.

Video Game Content Literature Review

This section includes a basic overview of the video game scholarship which seeks to understand the content of video games from a variety of perspectives. I also end with a brief overview of literature that focuses on discussions of race in film and in digital spaces. However, the vast majority of the research in this section discusses the content analysis, in one form or another, used to assess the visual components of video games – often this is performed through print media, trailer, website, or recorded gameplay analysis. For example, Dill and Thill (2007) looked at the gendered representations of male and female game characters on popular gaming magazine covers (861). Content analysis of video game depictions from popular gaming magazines reveal male characters represented as powerful, dominant, and aggressive (Dill & Thill, 2007). Female characters were often portrayed in passive roles, where the emphasis was on their status as “visions of beauty, objects of men’s heterosexual fantasies, and less important than m[ale]” characters (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 861). While an extreme emphasis is placed on the role of the woman as a sex object in video games, this theme does not occur for men (Dill & Thill, 2007). It’s worth noting that this study has been used and cited numerous times within the body of my full literature review (e.g., Burgess et al., 2011) as a standard for methodological development of video game content analyses, methods which will also be employed, in part, in this study. Additionally, Robinson et al. (2009) examined the portrayal of male and female video game characters on gaming websites. On video game web sites, female characters are portrayed in a more sexualized manner than are male characters (Robinson et al., 2009). Video game websites depict female characters as thin, young, attractive, and at times with little or no clothing while male characters are fully dressed and without form-fitting attire (Robinson et al., 2009). Video game animators may depict female characters in these ways because they believe gaming

targets male audiences. Furthermore, Chess (2012) investigated the cross-platform (although primarily PC) video game series *Diner Dash* and main character, Flo, and found themes centering on gender, empowerment, work, and leisure (83). Again, the main focus with research of this type is that it only investigates what happens within the game(s) or how the game's imagery could be interpreted, but not necessarily how an actual gameplayer may interact with it. The remainder of this section is divided into lit that focuses on visual analysis of gaming magazines and other print or physical media, websites and other digital content, and finally, actual game-play.

VG-Literature Analyzing Print Media

The first subcategory of content-specific analyses of video games focuses primarily on print media that promotes or describes video games in some way. Often this includes magazine articles, instruction booklets, box art, or other tangible and static media. For the purposes of this section, I have attempted to only briefly discuss the details of each study, focusing primarily on the methods employed by the authors. When noteworthy, I do discuss findings that seem to stand out in either their uniqueness (e.g., a category often understudied) or contradictory fashion (e.g., a result that significantly differs from established literature). By and large, the literature here is of a quantitative nature and often heavy with objective, positivist language, thus supporting the need for more critical, cultural engagement with video game study.

In an attempt to examine the way men and women were represented in video games, Burgess et al. (2007) content analyzed 225 console video game covers, finding that men appeared much more frequently (four times) than did women and that female characters were most often hypersexualized when featured prominently on the covers. These researchers used the images on video game covers, and content analyzed them for proportion of male to female

characters, sexualized art, as well as a portrayed connection between sex and violence for the characters. One of the aspects of this study that interests me most is the magnitude of the sample that was analyzed – 225 video game covers, with 173 that contained human characters that were subsequently coded and analyzed. The results of the study reflect a pattern most often noted in video game research featuring quantitative content analyses: male characters are featured twice as often as female characters, when present female characters were more often presented as busty or super-busty than were male characters presented as muscular or super-muscular. Although there are additional results from the multi-part eight hypothesis study, the finding that the video game characters they examined were disproportionate when it came to objectification is what I find the most intriguing in this article and the one of the largest take-aways from the study. As discussed previously, one major aspect of this project is the manner in which fans can get quite defensive about gendered game portrayals. In fact, a line of defense quite frequently used is that men are just as often objectified in games (albeit, in different ways) as are women.

As is the intention of this study, there is an established method within the field of game studies to conduct multi-part research in the hopes of obtaining a more holistic understanding of gameplay and gamer reaction. Though completed studies were hard to find, the intention to do so at some point in the future was at least made clear within the body of work of some scholars. As a precursor to future work on video game effects, Miller and Summers (2007) analyzed the gender differences amongst 115 different characters in U.S. gaming magazine articles. They found that males were most often main characters and the “heroes” of the games, as well as portrayed more muscularly and powerful in comparison to their more revealingly clothed, supplemental female counterparts. Additionally, in their 2011 study, Burgess et al. conducted a two-part quantitative content analysis of video game magazines and video game covers in order

to assess the various portrayals of game character race and the potential for developing stereotypic attitudes as a result. While the overarching goal of the study was to examine the visual portrayal of race in video game art, the authors were also able to draw conclusions about gender and social behaviors, as well. The final part of their study employed videos of game play from eight games to test participants for stereotypic attitudes regarding race of character and associations with violence.

Though less prevalent than other modes of video game analysis, some researchers attempt to establish longitudinal patterns within video game research. For example, in her large study, Scharrer (2004) content analyzed the images and text of over 1000 video game magazine advertisements for images of gender, violence, race, and ethnicity. She found a high prevalence of violence (present in over half of the ads) and representations of the few female characters were consistent with “male fantasies... that is, as highly attractive and highly sexualized” (Scharrer 2004, p. 409). Additionally, in a rare longitudinal analysis of video game magazines, Miller (2009) studied the depiction of violence and its potential to promote aggression in articles published over an 18-year time span from 1988 to 2005.

Finally, in an attempt to address a gap in existing video game studies of the way female characters are hypersexualized, Near (2013) analyzed game box art in comparison to game sales. This was a very significant study in that it points out how important sales, and therefore exposure, of certain games are when considering the potential impact character portrayals can have on players. From his findings, Near (2013) argues that there may be economic motivation for the marginalization and sexualization of female video game characters as sales were positively related to both the hypersexualization and noncentralized role of said characters. This study, as well as one I will mention below, is particularly relevant to my work because the game

used in my study was chosen due to a combination of factors, one of which was certainly sales and the potential reach game portrayals could have as a result.

VG-Literature Analyzing Digital Content

The second subcategory of this type of video game literature employs the study of digital content to analyze games. This often includes video game-specific websites, in-game screen shots, game commercials or “trailers” (now, more and more in the style of movie trailers), and other content that can be accessed or viewed online or on television, but still without actually playing the game. Again, much like the discussion that came before this, my primary focus is on the description of the methods employed in each of these research projects. This subset of the literature is particularly intriguing to me because it takes static promotion one step further, but still not quite as far as studying gameplay – which should be the primary objective of a video game scholar. Without a deep understanding of the way a game is played, it seems difficult to assess the potential implications game character and storyline could have on the actual players themselves – who, arguably, go far beyond simply viewing a trailer or reading promotional material.

In their 2007 study, Jansz and Martis analyzed the opening films of 12 video games, looking for representations of gender and race.¹⁶ This article is particularly relevant to my project because it focuses on the potentially false impression the incorporation of a female protagonist can have on the ‘gender equality’ of a video game. The researchers focus on something they call the ‘Lara Phenomenon’ – birthed out of the development of Lara Croft as the main character (and often sole human) in the *Tomb Raider* franchise (referenced throughout my

¹⁶ Many more modern, storyline based games now open with lengthy introductory ‘films’ that acclimate the player to the characters, their background, and what has lead them to their current situation. Games that employ cut scenes throughout their gameplay often include these as a precursor to the scenes to come.

introduction). The researchers content analyzed for the typical male to female character ratio, as well as gendered character features and the race of characters. Overall, the results of this study showed a more egalitarian distribution of male and female main characters, but less so when it comes to supporting characters. What stands out the most to me with this article is the fact that it contradicts the findings of the other game studies. There can be no finite conclusions about video game research conducted with social scientific measurements. The field is constantly changing and the gaming industry produces new games almost as consistently as the film industry produces new movies. This article helps to show that, sometimes, the proportion of male to female characters is more equal than it may have previously seemed. However, the female characters featured in the study were still highly sexualized, despite their dominant hero status, which also gets back to my concern with visual pleasure of the female form in gaming.

Though I try to concentrate on published studies, there were two peer-reviewed conference papers that I've included in this section because of their methods as well as their focus on certain variables. In a conference paper presented in 2011, Ta content analyzed video game websites and in-game screenshots from 50 popular games, coding specifically for race and gender. He was attempting to address a gap in literature that existed regarding race of characters and found a disproportionate number of White characters within his sample. For their 2009 paper, Demers and Scharrer analyzed over 200 television commercials looking at the demographics of the characters as well as depictions of violence and use of weaponry. In comparison to similar studies, they found a more realistic ratio of male to female characters when compared to actual video game players. However, there was a significantly unrealistic ratio of white characters to characters of color when compared to the races of real-life players. This paper, in particular, stands out because the authors took real-life audiences into consideration

when analyzing the sample games' content. I too will be specifically seeking out actual *Dead Island* players in later chapters, and this study sets a good precedence for doing so.

The final two examples of this subtype of literature I will highlight each address very different holes in existing gaming literature. In this unique content analysis, Martins, Williams, Harrison, and Ratan (2009) compared the measurements of female video game characters from 150 games to the real-life measurement averages of over 3000 women. The authors used screen captures of the characters and then measured their various body parts to get character body proportions, finding that characters were not proportional to the average US American woman. While their results were pretty typical in comparison to previous studies, they were the only one study I came across to actually use existing data on the proportions of US American women to discuss realistic vs. unrealistic body types of game characters. Additionally, in her 2011 study of casual game websites, Wohn (2011) found that her content analysis distinctly contradicted well established studies on the sexualization of characters in gaming. Not only were characters not sexualized, but there wasn't a significant difference between the portrayal of female and male characters and female characters were actually over-represented in her sample. While my study will not look at casual games, I am including Wohn's (2011) work because she employed established game studies methodologies and identifies a potential flaw in the narrow focus of existing literature. I too hope to show that by conducting game studies research that departs from traditional methodologies and study structures, we can begin to see more a multi-layered view of the gaming context.

VG-Literature Analyzing Gameplay

The final subsection of this type of gaming literature focuses on analyses of actual gameplay, but not exactly in the manner in which I will be employing it. By and large, the

research projects I have found for inclusion in this section base their results/discussions on chunks of recorded video games played by a volunteer for the project. The researchers in these studies still remain almost entirely removed from the gaming context in order to put forth some sort of objective stance on the content of the games in question. As I've already argued, I don't believe this is the best method of conducting video game research, but because it is such a well-established method, I must cover it here.

As should become clear up to this point, there is a rather prominent emphasis placed on the study of gender in video games. Dietz's (1998) content analysis of video games is one of the first of its kind to critically examine the representation of female characters and the presence of violence in games. While her methods are not entirely clear, it seems that she played each of the games in their entirety, as well as read the instruction booklets, in order to analyze the various characters in each one. However, Dietz (1998) helped to establish an early understanding of the underrepresentation and highly stereotyped portrayal of women in gaming.

In a similar vein, Beasley and Standley (2002) was another one of the early examples of such a study. The primary focus of this article is on either the presence or absence of female characters in video games, as well as the clothes they are wearing, as a way of determining gender role stereotyping in certain video games. While, admittedly, not a critical critique of the gaming industry, there are many interesting findings from the quantitative content analysis conducted in the study. Each aspect of the experiment in this article was mathematically planned to be as random as possible and include as representative a sample of the population as it could, and each term associated with the study's codebook was operationalized for the reader. After content analyzing 48 games, the researchers found there to be a significant amount of gender role stereotyping based on character presence (or absence) and the clothing they wore, as well as a

large disparity between proportions of male characters (427 characters) to female characters (82 characters), and indeterminate gendered characters (88) to female characters (82).

Again, I want to stress the positivist nature of this article. However, I think that this will be very useful to my discussion of representations of the female body in video games. In particular, what is significant here is the almost complete lack of female bodies in the sampled games in this experiment – but also the manner in which the women were clothed who did appear in the games. “Not only are women underrepresented in video games, but those who are present are less clothed than their male counterparts. Female characters are more likely to be seen in low-cut clothing and with bare arms than male characters, and nearly one half (41%) of all female characters were big busted” (Beasley & Standley, 2002, p. 289). While the authors presumptuously speak in a rather conclusive way about all video games, their statistical findings do add to the understanding that video games are dominated by male spaces (and men). This article is significant to my work to not only show a representation of the previous work done with gender and video games, but to also help establish the way in which the female body is adorned (or stripped) for visual pleasure of the male (or female-attracted) player.

Lachlan, Smith and Tamborini (2005) studied recorded gameplay of the first ten minutes of a game from 60 popular video games from three different consoles in order to study the portrayal of violence and potential for player affect. Video games portray violence in a variety of ways with multiple character roles where players have substantial opportunity to identify with at least one character (Lachlan et al., 2005). Their overall argument was that if a player is exposed to these types of images, attunes to them, and is attracted to the outcomes, they have an increased chance of reconstructing the modeled behavior. Brooksby’s (2008) qualitative content analysis of 10 video games was one of the more unique in this body of literature. He analyzed 15 minutes of

recorded play from each of the games in his sample, evaluating them for representations of mobility, ability, psychology, social, and pain. This was one of the very few studies of this kind to focus on content that didn't directly include or preclude discussions of race, gender, sexuality, or any other normalized demographic identity category. Furthermore, for their content analysis, Downs and Smith (2010) used videotapes of the first 20 minutes of gameplay for 60 popular video games. They used undergraduate student volunteers who were experienced gamers to play the games while a segment of their gameplay was recorded, and then trained coders who were a mix of those same players and those who were not analyzed the tapes. This study specifically coded for representations of biologic sex and sexuality, finding that females were underrepresented but overly sexualized in comparison to male characters.

To conclude this section, in an attempt to fill a gap in existing literature that focuses on the negative social behaviors in video games, Ivory, Williams, Martins, and Consalvo (2009) content analyzed a sample of 133 top-selling games for uses of profanity. An experienced gamer played each game for 30 minutes, which was digitally recorded for later analysis by additional coders. They found profanity present in only a small proportion of the games, but a high prevalence of profanity in the ones that did contain it. Additionally, Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory (2009) content analyzed a sample of 150 games for representations of gender, race, and age. Much like the study done by Near (2013), Williams et al. (2009) weighted the results of their study by the sales of the games they analyzed in order to infer the potential impact their results could have on gamers. Though it is not directly stated, the method employed by this study appears to be the same one as Ivory et al. (2009), the difference being the focus of the coders after data 'collection'. They found a high representation of white, male, adults in comparison to

other types of characters – what sets this study apart from others is its incorporation of age as a factor.

Relevant Race and Media Related Literature

Another element of interest in this project is the representation of black female protagonists, particularly those who have begun emerging in survival-horror video games. Although many of the studies I have discussed leading up to this point have included race as a category for evaluation, none of them have done so in a very critical or meaningful way. Before finally getting into the analysis of this project, first the contested ‘body’ of the black, female horror protagonist will be highlighted. In her discussion of the film *Mahogany*, Gaines (1999) describes the complicated struggle black feminists face with regard to privileging either a gender-based politic or a race-based one. The main character Tracy in the film is framed in such a way that her gender overpowers her race, seemingly eliminating or alleviating the racial tension associated with a movie featuring a white male antagonist and a black female protagonist. Gaines (1999) explains that “these two expectations correspond with the two worlds and two struggles which structure the film: the struggle over the sexual objectification of Tracy’s body in the face of commercial exploitation, and the struggle of the black community in the face of class exploitation” (297). Furthermore, Gaines (1999) discusses the historical erasure of the black female body: she is either a “woman” umbrella-ed under the (white) feminist movements or “black” and usurped by racial movements but scarcely is she both (303). Additionally, Caputi and Sagle (2004) argue that the standard white femme fatale in popular film and television is wrought with sexist and racial politics, because she is only made “bad” by possessing qualities more common in women of color. For example, they specifically identify femme fatale character traits, such as “primitive emotions and lusts, violence, sexual aggression...”, as more commonly

associated with women of color in non-noir film genres (92). This expands upon Gaines' (1999) argument, because the white femme fatale has the potentiality to depict a whitened black female completely stripped of her race. Furthermore, in their analysis of the more prevailing media tropes of black women, Brown Givens and Monahan (2005), describe two stereotyped personas in particular that are relevant to this study: the "jezebel" character as sexual, calculating, exotic, vain, and forward, and the "mammy" character as asexual, maternal, nurturing, protective and devoted (93). The authors examined the tie between real-life stereotyping and viewing of mediated representations of these tropes.

However, most important for inclusion in this section is the work by Lisa Nakamura (e.g., Kolko, Nakamura, & Gilbert, 2000; Nakamura, 2008; Nakamura & Chow-White 2012) on digital race and representations of race in cyberspace. Most strikingly is the argument that "[w]hile there are similar patterns of silence about race when it comes to interpersonal interaction in "the real world," the presence of visual and aural markers of race (no matter how inaccurate those may be) means that race is rarely (if ever) as invisible offline as it is in cyberspace" (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000, p. 1). Within the gaming context, an actor of color cannot just simply be cast into a certain stereotyped role, they must also be drawn and coded that way. Race through every "visual and aural marking" described by Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) is thus a very active and conscious decision. Furthermore, the authors argue that despite the supposed impression of online spaces as a place that can become free of identity, these spaces are actually wrought with race and all of the preexisting notions people have about race are always with them in these contexts. The false impression that race can be played with or completely eliminated in cyberspace is actually quite dangerous, because it leaves open the door to dismiss very real instances of racism as illegitimate or inconsequential to "real world" events

(Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000). This fits in precisely where I hope to enter the conversation on racist video game characters – the character I am analyzing in *Dead Island* is without a doubt a racist one, and the outright dismissal of her portrayal because it’s “just” a game is common amongst gamers.

In keeping with my discussions of particular methodologies within this section, it’s important to discuss the way in which Nakamura (2008) defines the comparatively contemporary field of “visual cultural studies, [as] an interdisciplinary type of theoretical and critical practice with practitioners from all sorts of backgrounds who share a focus on the production of identity in visual forms” (5). She uses visual cultural studies throughout her book, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, to analyze the ways in which online users create digital representations of the body, with particular emphasis on race and gender identity formations. Furthermore, throughout this significant contribution to discussions of race and digital culture, she discusses topics including “buddy” icons (i.e., the small images AOL Instant Messenger users choose to signify their account), the concept of racial uncertainty or “passing” online, the prevalence of White, male privilege within technologically focused movies (specifically *the Matrix* series and *Minority Report*), the uses of avatars and signatures on online message boards, and the myth surrounding the concept that people of color are more often consumers than creators of digital content. Finally, in the introduction to their edited collection of essays, *Race after the Internet*, Nakamura and Chow-White (2012) call out the need for more intersectional work that takes both race and digital culture into consideration. “Critical race studies must take account of the digital, and digital media and technology studies must take account of race” (6) without ignoring how intertwined the two have been from the start. Studies involving both race and the digital shouldn’t forget that race doesn’t just ‘come into being’ after a researcher decides

to turn their focus that way, but understand how much work has gone into making race less visible from the beginning.

This review of literature is intended to help ground this individual case study and establish the foundation from which I worked through my visual analysis of *Dead Island*. As stated, the discussion of race-related literature comes tangentially into this review as compared to the previous overview of specific video game studies. However, it is through the tie to Nakamura's research that I make many more critical connections to my artifact. I move now to my analysis and a preliminary discussion of how I'm addressing my research concerns.

Analysis and Preliminary Discussion

I have found it best to organize my analysis of the game through a discussion of three primary gaming dimensions: the *Dead Island* opening, individual characters, Purna more specifically, and various aspects of in-game playing. A great deal of my focus is placed on aspects of the game that involve very little actual playing. The opening cinematic scene and the character-select screen offer a deep well of data for analysis – explained more thoroughly below. I analyzed Purna more closely by playing through the game as her character in order to better address the out-of-game controversies I've previously discussed. Following that, my discussion of in-game content focuses around gendered and racialized differences in dialogue and appearance, and questlines.¹⁷

Game Opening

Dead Island (2011) opens with a cut scene propelled along through the eyes of a non-playable character (NPC) whose only purpose is to open the story and briefly interact with each

¹⁷ The various main and side adventures pertinent to the game's storyline that the gameplayer is able to find and engage. Questlines can be assigned by main storyline characters, side characters, or triggered by the environment.

of the four main protagonists. Through brief glimpses of hands and mirror-reflected images, it can be discerned that this scene is playing out through the eyes of a white, male island patron who has been drinking heavily and passes out at the end of the scene after ingesting three unidentifiable red pills. Visually, the audience/player is introduced to Logan, Purna, Sam B, and then Xian Mei, through this NPC's point-of-view, but interacts with the male characters first, before interacting with the female ones. He wanders from a walkway up to the resort's dance club/bar area, where he is grabbed by a drunken Logan, ranting about his fame and 'who he is' to the POV character.¹⁸ Next, Purna can be seen dancing with a woman in the background as the POV character climbs onto the stage with Sam B, who is performing his one-hit rap song, "Who Do You Voodoo, Bitch?", (playing throughout the entire clip). Sam B pushes him off the stage, where Purna grabs him, insults him, and pushes him off to the side of the dance floor. Finally, he wanders into the woman's restroom where Xian Mei is overheard, then seen, trying to comfort a bleeding/ passed out/dead woman on the floor. She then confronts the POV character, as he steals red pills next to the bleeding woman, and shoos him from the restroom where he heads to his room and passes out – effectively ending the scene and carrying the player to the character select screen to start the game officially.

Individual Characters

While somewhat convoluted, this scene sets up each character quite succinctly. The character-select screen that follows this cinematic opening begins the player's first chance at actual interaction with the game. Here, they're able to browse through each of the four main protagonists, explore their skill sets and specialties, as well as hear, in their own words, a bit more about their backgrounds. From his character selection biography, Logan Carter, from

¹⁸ POV: point-of-view – the character is referred to this way because the audience experiences their point-of-view throughout the opening.

Texas, is an ex-quarterback from an unidentified “championship” NFL team, known for drinking and doing drugs. He was fired following a drag race that killed his female passenger while also shattering his leg in six places. He was flown out to Banoi to promote a blood drive being held on the island. His most prominent character trait is that he drinks, a lot, which both the opening scene and his bio strongly convey. Continuing in her own words as well, Purna states that she was the first female half-Aborigine vice detective in Sydney. She alludes to her dismissal from the precinct as unofficially a result of the “old boys’ club” nature of her former colleagues, who were either sexist or racist against her, but officially a result of shooting and wounding a wealthy politician (who was able to buy his way out of trouble). She is on the island now because she is working as a bodyguard for “rich assholes.” Her dominant character trait is one of guardianship – which will be discussed in detail below. Both she and Logan speak aggressively throughout their bios with a lot of bitter discussions of their pasts and how they ended on Banoi. This too is conveyed well in the opening cut scene. See Figure 6 for a group shot of the four heroes.

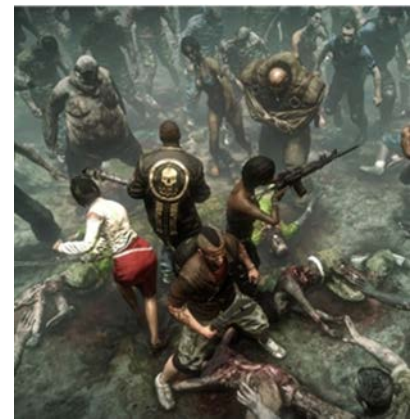


Figure 6. The four main protagonists. Clockwise starting on the left: Xian Mei, Sam B, Purna, and Logan. (Gaskill, A. 2011. Co-Optimus).

Sam B states that he is from New Orleans, and that his father died in prison and his brokenhearted mother never got over it – thus filling her life with drug and alcohol abuse and promiscuity. He was raised by his grandmother, and always dreamed of becoming a rapper. The song he is performing in the opening scene was created during Halloween, as a joke, but skyrocketed in popularity. He was never able to escape the shadow of the song and despite his anger over never writing another hit, he got this gig to try to forge a comeback. A prominent aspect of his character profile is his desire/attraction for money. Finally, Xian Mei, the calmest

and most soft spoken of the four heroes, details her biography. Her father was a police officer in Hong Kong, who taught her martial arts at a young age before he was killed in action. She's very smart and finished at the top of her class, going on to become part of an all-female anti-organized crime squad. However, she suffered gender discrimination before being sent to the resort to be an informer and spy. She states that she thinks she is letting her father's memory down and that he wouldn't be proud of her, but also that she's a patriot and will stick to her assignment for that reason. Xian Mei's in-game character seems to be the least developed of the four, but being quiet and fast are her prominent character traits.

Though it would be fitting to discuss here, I have reserved describing physical appearance of the characters in too great of detail until later in this analysis, following my discussion of Purna as an individual character. It is through their contrast with Purna that I feel physical appearance stands out most starkly for the remaining three protagonists. Before I get to that, however, I will first describe the skills and specialties of these four characters.

Skills and specialties. The reason I have given such rich descriptions of the character's biographies is because from this moment on, there is very little in-game content to distinguish the characters from one another or to develop them much further. However, one of the few remaining areas of the game that differentiate the characters is their skill sets: starting health stats, specialties, and "skill trees". Each character has slightly different health stats to start, but not so different that they greatly effect game-play; for example, Purna starts with 100 health, 100 speed, and 90 stamina, while Logan starts with 100 health, 100 speed, and 80 stamina. Each character also has a different specialty area and corresponding combat area in which they have slightly more talent or skill than each of the other three characters – this tends to stem from their bios. These specialties directly influence the options available on their "skill trees," and how the

character will develop throughout the game. According to the *Dead Island* (2011) instructional manual and in-game cues, Purna is “the leader” and the “firearms expert” of the group, most likely because of her former career in law enforcement and current position in private security (p. 8). Similarly, Logan, as a former quarterback, is the “Jack of all Trades” and “throwing expert”, while Xian Mei, the spy and martial arts expert, is “the Assassin” and “sharp weapons expert” and Sam B is “the Tank” and “blunt weapon expert”.¹⁹ Both Logan’s and Sam B’s specialties are a little harder to decode, but Sam B’s bulkier build appears to lend him to heavier weapons handling. Logan, on the other hand, as the only white, male hero in the game could potentially have been deemed “Jack of All Trades” as a default protagonist position (*Dead Island*, 2011, p. 8). It should be noted that this default protagonist position is also made clear by the opening cut scene, discussed above, that plays out through the eyes of an unidentified white male as well as the occasional use of masculine-neutral terms in dialogue (discussed more in a later section).

As previously mentioned, the character’s specialties dictate the options available on the three main branches of their skill trees. Briefly, each character has three tracks: “Fury”, which builds each character’s specialty ability; “Combat”, which builds weapon and combat skills; and “Survival”, which contains skills necessary for island survival (*Dead Island*, 2011, p. 9). For example, Purna has several different upgrades available to firearms, bullets acquisition, weapon modifications, etc. Similar options are available for Logan for throwing, for Sam B for blunt objects, and for Xian Mei for blades. See Figure 7 below for Purna’s skill tree, with the two discussed skills sets highlighted. However, buried within these charts are very interesting skills for each character. Specifically, for Purna, is the skill “Gender Wars,” for which she gets increased damage against enemies of the opposite sex (up to 15%). There is no comparable skill

¹⁹ “Tank” is a designation for heavier – both body girth and muscle – characters that are usually part of multi-player video games that function as the “muscle” of the group.

on either of the male character's skill trees and Xian Mei does not possess a similar skill. The male characters each have other specialty skills without comparable matches for the others, but, in general, Xian Mei is without any specifically 'demeaning' skill. Logan's skill, "Drunken Master," and Sam B's skill, "Money Magnet," while problematic, are not nearly as damaging to their characters as Purna's "Gender Wars."



Figure 7. Purna's "Skill Tree" from in-game play. Her "Gender Wars" skill is circled in pink, with her main "Guardian" skills circled in red.

Problematic Purna

Shortly after the *Dead Island* (2011) release, a controversy surrounding one of Purna's skills, "Gender Wars," briefly circulated among online gaming news sites and forums. According to Eykemans (2011), a player purchased the PC version of the game, accessed the game's source code and found written code for a skill called "Feminist Whore," which previously existed for Purna. "Feminist Whore" was the original name for Purna's finalized in-game skill, "Gender Wars" (Crecente, 2011). A brand manager with the development company, Techland, called the code "highly inappropriate", said that it was "inexcusably overlooked" and that it was "considered a private joke" by the game programmer, while also apologizing several times

(Crecente, 2011). This potentially ruins her character's credibility with players, which will be thoroughly investigated in the next chapter. Choosing this skill is at the player's discretion, but lower-level zombies are often mixed male and female, while higher-level specialty 'boss' zombies and aggressive human enemies are vastly male, which leaves Purna with the upper hand the majority of the time if this skill is chosen. Overall, though, it is demeaning to Purna that she not only has a skill that was previously so caustically named, but also that the game creators felt she needed an extra boost against male enemies. Because of this, it's possible that Purna's character was built around denigration for seemingly strong women, despite her position as the leader of the four heroes.

Another possible interpretation for the existence of this skill could come from Purna's background and the brief indication that she could be a queer character. As will be discussed below, Purna suffered much gender and racial discrimination while she served on the Sydney police force (alluded to in the quote from her character bio at the beginning of the chapter). Because of this, she has quite a bit of disdain for wealthy, powerful people, as indicated in her biography and in-game dialogue. Generally, she is talking about men in these contexts, either those from her past or those in the game. Thus, her historical dislike for men could lend to her increased aggressiveness toward enemies of the opposite sex. Additionally, in the very opening scene, she is shown dancing with a woman at the club, while most other couplings are heterosexual pairings. This queers her character, adding another layer to her othered identity. Therefore, given the original name for the "Gender Wars" skill, Purna appears to be coded as a black, lesbian, man-hating feminist, and her increased power against male enemies derives from that.

One of the most interesting parts of Purna's character is the contradictory personality traits woven throughout her storyline. As discussed in the preceding paragraph, she has a temperament associated with 'man-hating,' but she is also designated the group's leader.



Figure 8. Purna's caretaking in action. Purna is comforting one of the primary recurring characters in the game, the young woman, Jin.

Therefore, while she is sometimes depicted as aggressive and bitter toward men, she is also still a caretaker and leader of a mixed gender group.

Moreover, with that leadership come skill sets that lend themselves to caring for those other players and

NPCs in multi-player combat (see Figure 8). For

example, she has three different "Guardian" skill upgrades, which benefit both her and whatever teammates she's playing with at the time (highlighted in Figure 7 above). With each successive upgrade to the Guardian skills, Purna's fellow teammates get positive upgrades on their damage, critical hit chances, and overall health. These Guardian skills serve to protect and reinforce companion players' combat skills, health, and stamina. This upgrade makes her a very valuable 'guardian' or support-type character.²⁰ However, none of the other hero characters has any skill upgrades that effect other players. Additionally, the Guardian skills are not (as) optional as the "Gender Wars" skill – if the player wants to upgrade the Fury skill tree branch, they must do so by upgrading the Guardian skills.

It could be argued that positioning Purna as both an angry, aggressive black woman and a leader and caretaker for the group of survivors also dually categorizes her into two prominent media stereotypes for black women: the jezebel and the mammy, as alluded to in the literature

²⁰ In classic role-playing games (RPGs), a support character is one whose skills and specialties focus on supporting those of their fellow players – specifically, damage, health, and healing increases.

review above. Many of the skills Purna develops correspond with the mammy character, while her appearance and personality align quite closely with the jezebel. See Figure 9 for an example of Purna's concept art and promotional imagery. Purna's attire and physique can certainly be considered sexualized, and throughout the game, she makes vain references to ruining her hair and dress. In this regard, the layering of identities for Purna's character seems to both contradict and support Gaines' (1999) argument about black women in cinema. While establishing her character, it's made clear to the player that Purna's angry temperament is birthed from a long history of dealing with both gender and racial discrimination, and she fits (very dated) media stereotypes for black women. However, throughout the game her racial identity does seem to be usurped by her positioning as a "man-hating" woman – wholly regardless of her race. I will further discuss her appearance below, in conjunction with that of the other characters, as well as in-game dialogue.

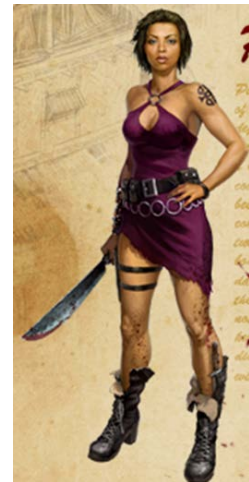


Figure 9. The original concept art for Purna's character. This version was published on the *Dead Island* website and used for pre-release promotional material. (Dead Island).

In-Game Play: Appearance and Dialogue

As explained above, Purna's character seems to be the most sexualized of the four, despite the opportunity presented to additionally sexualize Xian Mei, as well. Purna is also the one on which the most effort seems to have been placed to beautify her promotional imagery as compared to her in-game character art (see Figures 10, 11, and 12).



Figure 10. Promotional art for each of the four main protagonists. These too were published on the game's main website and used in pre-release materials (Dead Island).

However, it could be argued that, in general, the characters' appearance and dress does ring consistent

with each of their roles on the island and immediate aftermath of a zombie outbreak. As an undercover security guard who was out at a club during the initial attacks, Purna is still dressed in eveningwear with hidden weapons exposed by tears in her attire. Xian Mei is dressed in a very similar manner, sporting her resort employee uniform, including name tag, with similar rips, tears, and dirt smudges. Sam B is dressed in his performance outfit, complete with thick gold “B” chain and other jewelry, heavy coat, and blood splattered jeans. Finally, Logan looks like a very standard young American man, in a casual top and cargo khaki shorts, similarly blood stained to Sam B’s.

Sam B and Logan are, however, somewhat less worse for the wear as far as clothing is concerned. While they are both dirtied and bloodied in various ways, their clothing is mostly intact, mostly covering their body parts. Sidestepping the argument of appropriate fit between character bio and attire, the differences between dress for the female and dress for the male characters is starkly gendered. Both Purna and Xian Mei are wearing skirted outfits, with very high slits that expose their upper thighs. On Purna, as mentioned, this displays her hidden firearm, but for Xian Mei, it reveals the top of her thigh high, often quite a sexualized image. Additionally, both women have exposed cleavage in one way or another – for Xian Mei, this is the loosened, unbuttoned portion of her top, but for Purna this takes the form of a classic revealing ‘boob window’ in her dress (see Figure 11).

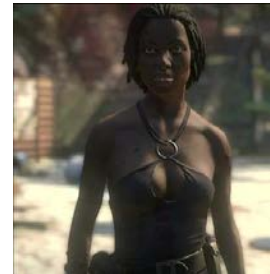


Figure 11. In-game image of Purna from early in *Dead Island* game play. This gives a better idea of the differences between her promotional art and her final, in-game art, in addition to seeing the top portion of her dress. (Game Guys. 2011. *News10*).

The final difference in appearance for the four characters is in the representation of



Figure 12. In-game still of Xian Mei. She is depicted with a torn sleeve and scratched arm, with additional markings on her face, obscured by her hair.

injury, and therefore, pain or weakness. While each characters has some

blood splatter on their clothing or skin, neither Sam B, Logan, nor Purna

have the appearance of personal physical injury anywhere on their bodies.

Xian Mei bears the brunt of physical representation of the pain and effort it

takes to survive *Dead Island*. This is one of the few stand-out differences for

her character throughout the entire game. Across promotional and in-game

art, she appears nearly broken by the experience (see Figure 12). Both her

face and body have clear marks from either attacks or environmental damage

that could be the result of running, hiding, and/or fighting. These subtle

marks code her as the weakest of the four characters, as she was the most susceptible to injury –

despite the knowledge that Logan has suffered many physical injuries in his past and currently

has a bum knee. Though there is no clear indication if this is why, it could be possible that this

character trait for Xian Mei is the result of a combination between gender and race. While

physical representations of gender in *Dead Island* have been established throughout this section,

it's hard to imagine why Xian Mei is singled out from Purna in this regard if not for race. In the

previous section, I argued that Purna's character is built around a very tough exterior built-up by

her background in law enforcement and everything she endured while on the force. This

masculinizes her character enough to save her from possessing the stereotypical character trait of some women in games (and other media): weakness and frailty.

However, despite the differences that peppered throughout the game as far as character appearance is concerned, dialogue throughout the game is pretty consistent across characters.

The characters have their own signature phrases, associated with their personalities, but by and

large they say many of the same lines to keep the game moving. For example, throughout various parts of the game Purna exclaims and swears at the zombies while killing them and cries out for help when overrun or attacked. In his gameplay, Logan cries out for help in the exact same way, while also exclaiming and swearing at the zombies. The primary difference between the two in this regard is the regional slang they each employ – Purna uses words like “fuckwit” while Logan uses “douchebag”. There is really only more clear difference in dialogue that could be considered gendered – and that’s the occasional use of masculine pronouns by NPCs the player encounters during gameplay. However, by and large, the dialogue serves as another way to reinforce the consistent storyline in *Dead Island* (2011) that cannot be altered by choice of playable character.

In-Game Play: Questlines

While the majority of the in-game dialogue can be interpreted as racially and gender neutral with regard to chosen hero, the same cannot be said for the questlines that progress the game’s primary (and side) storyline. There are 50 quests that need to be completed in order to finish *Dead Island* (2011), and only eight of those are given to the player by a female NPC. This is significant because the NPCs that give questlines to the hero tend to also be protagonist characters important to the storyline. For example, the first NPC protagonist the hero encounters is the head lifeguard of the resort, John Sinamoi, who is the leader of a substantial group of survivors and initiates quests such as securing safe lodging, activating satellites to call for help, and getting electricity back for the survivors. Sinamoi is responsible for giving the hero 10 of the main quests, which is two more than those given by all female protagonists combined.

There also seems to be a significant difference between the types of main quests given by male NPCs and those given by female NPCs. Most main quests given to the hero by female

NPCs focus more around caretaking, such as getting and sharing supplies like food and water, than on finding a way off the island, as with Sinamoi's quests. It is possible that this difference stems from the considerably larger number of main quests given by male NPCs than female NPCs, and if more quests were given by females perhaps they would be more instrumental to getting off the island. However, *Dead Island* (2011) is not based on true events, and someone (or a team of someones) purposefully wrote the story the way it is played; meaning that they specifically chose what characters would be important to the main questline and what quests those characters would give to the hero.

Final Observations

All in all, the crux of this game seems to lie in the imagination of the game player. Because there is very little additional development of the characters beyond the first Act of the game, and no individualized interaction between specific heroes and NPCs, it was hard to discern a more complex profile for Purna or her fellow survivors. In the few cut scenes that are spread out throughout the game, all four heroes are always present and work together as a team. Additionally, no one character dominates these scenes throughout the entire game – meaning this game does not appear to be 'about' one hero more than any of the others. This does provide an interesting contrast from other survival video games in which one character triumphs over others, or even horror films in which a final girl triumphs over the monster. For large portions of the game, Purna's character is clearly based around the same negative stereotypes that pop up in other media regarding black women. Additionally, the extreme lack of development for her or her fellow characters shows how little they actually matter to the story. While it can be said that video games do employ a great many horror filmic concepts well, and the cut scenes of *Dead Island* (2011) did too, that doesn't necessarily translate into positive character development.

Chapter-Specific Limitations

It's important to note a few of the unexpected turns taken in *Dead Island's* (2011) gameplay which directly impacted this research project. Analyzing Purna's character for gender and racial coding was a more difficult task than it had originally seemed like it would be. This was mostly because the game is designed to create a seamless playing experience for whichever of the four main protagonists the game-player decides to choose. In fact, a search for alternative character storylines (i.e., Logan's, Sam B's, or Xian Mei's) to compliment the researcher's own (Purna) game-playing experience was fruitless. As it turns out, much of the characters' in-game dialogue, actions, and choices are virtually the same, save for a few choice verbal phrases and action skill sets. Additionally, the major storyline cut scenes portrayed the heroes as a quartet that moved through the game together, despite only actually seeing the player's chosen hero during game play. Because of this, there was very little interaction with other NPCs that was specifically racialized or gendered – largely, dialogue and cut scenes were neutral in this regard as if addressing a mixed gender and race group. On occasion, terms like “brah” or “man” punctuated dialogue in a seemingly masculine-neutral manner, which were discussed above.

CHAPTER V – MY SIDE, YOUR SIDE, MY SIDE, YOUR SIDE:
QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS AND ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY OF GAMING
SPACE COMMENTARY²¹

Things like this are a problem because they demonstrate a deep seated misogyny on the part of the company responsible. While I wish I could laugh it off and say their issues are their own problem and the game should be judged only as a final product the bitter taste it leaves won't just go away.

The games industry has struggled with issues of representation for many years, and a disturbing attitude towards women still remains. I hate having to define myself by my gender, I feel like I am still fighting battles that should have been dismissed in the 70s. But every time I visit a 'gaming' site filled with half naked women and 'hot-t lesbians' I am reminded that in this small subset of society those battles still need to be fought.

Then, whenever I feel progress is being made, something like this surfaces and I am reminded that it is not the attitude only of a few trolls but something systemic throughout the genre. (M*****t, *Eurogamer.net* article comment)

Introduction

In this chapter, I'm going to revisit the three motivating events that inspired my dissertation. However, I'll be discussing each in much more detail, and quoting specific comments from articles associated with these events. So please, make note of the trigger warning in the footnote. Beginning with the first event, in 2011, one of the major video game developers, Electronic Arts (EA), added a female avatar to their NHL video game series at the request of a young female fan (Wyshynski, 2011). The article, printed online in the Yahoo! Sports section, was innocuous enough in its discussion of what lead up to the development of a female avatar and the involvement of the 14-year old hockey and video game playing girl. The article actually highlighted the lack of female avatars in some areas of the industry and celebrated not only the girl for speaking up but also EA for trying to satisfy their fan base for allowing the girl to “finally be herself” in the game (Wyshynski, 2011). However, the comments section of the

²¹ It should probably be said – trigger warning – the user comments quoted throughout this analysis are graphic in their use of language, their threats, their depictions of violence, etc. Basically, they're not pretty, but are included unedited for the sake of full exposure.

article painted a completely different picture of what the “fans” actually want in their sports games. Mixed in with the praise and typical dismissive “this isn’t news” comments, other prevalent comments ranged from stereotypically sexist, such as:

“What was she doing out of the kitchen?”²²

and

“The game is called N H L - it's a f*cking mens' league. Do you see us complaining that we can't put a man into WNBA games? Oh wait, there is no WNBA game for a reason. The same reason there's no WNHL”,

to startlingly cruel, such as

“Women aren't even allowed to play without full face masks on, so they better be wearing them in NHL 12 or else it's concussion time for these beauty queens....”

and

“I can't wait to punch out my first set of women teeth on this game ^.^” (Wyshynski, 2011).

After reading through several pages of the 1500+ comments to this short article, I started to develop the idea for this chapter (as well as dissertation), centered around the hope that predominant themes in comment sections could not all be this misogynistically charged. I further developed this idea with additional preliminary analyses of comment sections in other online spaces.

Continuing then, I also got inspiration for this part of my dissertation project while following the development of Anita Sarkeesian’s Kickstarter.com critical media project, “Tropes vs. Women in Gaming”, discussed next, and #GamerGate, discussed later in this chapter. In mid-

²² In my previous analysis, I had not identified the specific Yahoo! users who posted these comments, because a quick Google search would likely pull up their profiles. I will maintain the manner in which I had quoted them then, but I will use my current method of anonymization of usernames in the CA examples.

May, 2012, Sarkeesian created the page, seeking public funding for a multi-part online documentary-style video series discussing the tropes of female characters in video games, past and present (“Tropes vs.”). She was reacted to with death threats, threats of sexual assault, and multiple hacks to her personal and professional websites, including the addition of pornographic images and inflammatory information on her Wikipedia page (Plunkett, 2012; Rosenberg, 2012). To reiterate from my introductory chapter, my research concerns come together with this case study, and are as follows: What could cause those in the growing body of people belonging to ‘video game culture’ and espousing a ‘gamer’ identity to take up ‘digital arms’ in protest to Sarkeesian’s project? What is at the forefront here is a complicated mix of identity development and fervent community protection, leaving me to wonder: How do self-proclaimed gamers interact in online non-gaming settings? How do they build and reinforce gamer culture through these spaces and interactions? How does a gamer develop an identity, in such a way that they would go to such lengths (e.g., hacktivism) to both protect and reinforce what that identity represents from perceived threats? These questions inform what I believe to be important underlying goals of this dissertation. I believe the culture that has developed amongst gamers is representative of an online non-gaming gaming-related space. It appears as though it was Sarkeesian’s mere presence, as a self-identified feminist media critic, that ‘caused’ the uproar. Before I continue, however, I will provide a bit more background on Sarkeesian and her project.

The feminist pop culture media critic and founder of critical media video blog, *Feminist Frequency* (“About”), included examples of the tropes she anticipated analyzing in the originally proposed five-part series, including the “Damsel in Distress”, “The Fighting F#@k Toy”, and “The Sexy Sidekick”. After describing her goals and linking this new series to popular (but

significantly smaller) projects she had created and shared through *Feminist Frequency*, Sarkeesian (“Tropes vs.”) concludes her original project proposal with:

Help me create another successful video series that will contribute to and help amplify the existing conversations happening about female characters in games and maybe even get the attention of the gaming industry to start creating more interesting, engaging and complex female characters, that avoid the standard boring clichés.

(Sarkeesian, “Tropes vs.”, final para.)

From the moment she launched her Kickstarter fund up until the final revisions of this chapter, an Internet search of the terms “feminist”, “gamer”, and “online harassment” retrieves a plethora of results concerning Sarkeesian and her seemingly benign video game project (see Figure 13). Sarkeesian received heavy backlash from the (mostly) male components of video gaming culture (predominantly gamers and critics, but not necessarily those on the end of production). Plunkett (2012), contributing editor to popular video game blog *Kotaku*, referred to those involved with the harassment with contempt, “there's disagreeing with someone's point of view. There's vehemently disagreeing with someone's point of view. Then, about 17 levels past that, there's this shit.” Sarkeesian, herself, compiled a long stream of the comments she received on the YouTube page for her Kickstarter video for a *Feminist Frequency* blog post entitled, “Harassment, Misogyny and Silencing on YouTube” (Sarkeesian). A couple examples of the typical ‘types’ of comments posted to her page (out of the thousands left just on this YouTube video), for the sake of clarity, are included below.

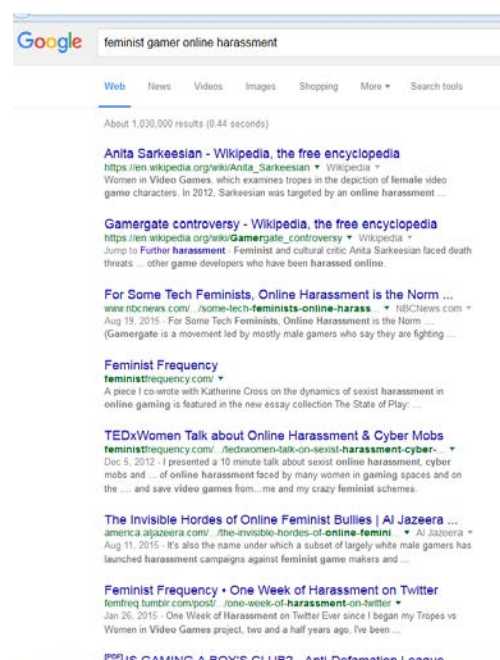


Figure 13. Screen capture of internet search for "feminist gamer online harassment". There are multiple Anita Sarkeesian and Feminist Frequency top hits.

“Tits or get the fuck out.” (multiple posters)²³

“She needs a good fucking, good luck finding it though.”

“Back to the kitchen, cunt”

“Pathetic, GET OVER women looking sexy in videogames. You and the rest of these feminist extremists have a massive victim complex. There is nothing wrong with female characters looking sexy...”

The comments above, as well as the media coverage of Sarkeesian’s project and the subsequent harassment she received, lend credence to the strength of emotional reactions in online spaces I believe develop around the female body – both its mediated portrayal and the way anti-feminist, anti-women posters react to the presence of vocal women in online spaces. On June 16, 2012, Sarkeesian’s project was fully funded and she has been working on her video project since, posting periodic updates and participating in interviews and guest blogging to lend voice to the online harassment she faced at the time of starting her project and up to this point. Furthermore, the five-part video series has been expanded to a 12-part series, thanks in part to the publicity her project received from the negative backlash, which resulted in an extreme over-funding of the Kickstarter (her original goal was for \$6,000 and she was funded for close to \$160,000) allowing for such an expansion (“Tropes vs.”). While this could certainly be interpreted as a ‘victory’ over the harassment Sarkeesian endured, the fact still remains that it happened in the first place. What interests me most about this particular example of the online harassment faced by female gamers (of which this is far from the first example) is the vehemence with which many of the commenters and hackers both attacked Sarkeesian’s project goals and

²³ As with the Yahoo! commenters, I did not identify YouTube users in this preliminary analysis.

the energy with which they defended their identities as gamers (and the cultural texts which contribute to the culture) against a supposed feminist attack.

Intersections between gender and gaming are not new but have changed little (globally) over the course of video game history. However, many from the community claim that women are now the heroic stars of games (e.g., Lara Croft of Crystal Dynamics *Tomb Raider* success) and therefore gender inequity no longer exists. This is an interesting parallel to the rhetoric that surrounds anti-/post-feminist discussions about women working, having the right to vote, having access to birth control, etc. and therefore no longer in need of feminism. What's important here is who typically champions this argument in these spaces – white, middle-class male gamers. Within the majority of comments attacking Sarkeesian, the overarching theme of a complete and total misunderstanding of the terms “feminism” and “feminist” has emerged. It appears that the ‘F-bomb’ gets dropped simply because a woman is speaking up about a potentially problematic depiction of other women. A quick, and admittedly not thorough, glimpse into the comments section of the Kickstarter YouTube video also reveals attacks leveled at any posters who come to Sarkeesian's defense – particularly if the poster reveals their sex as female.²⁴ Because Sarkeesian is the creator and physical representation of a site called *Feminist Frequency*, it is not a large leap in logic to say that she considers herself a feminist. But, within the comments section, it becomes clear that “feminist” starts to mean “woman”.

In conjunction with a feminist standpoint, it would be easy to dismiss their refusal to acknowledge existing power differences between male and female gamers as simply a result of

²⁴ The comment section for this video had been closed and disabled not long after this eruption of hostile commenting. I had copied and saved as many comments as I could at the time. There were 19 separate pages of YouTube comments (14, 216 total comments), out of which I saved the first and last five pages into 10 different word documents with a total of 771 pages of archived comments.

their positionality. However, even when confronted with information presented in a seemingly non-threatening way, many gamers still tend to react viciously and protectively of their community's status quo. For example, a comment from a YouTube user in response to another poster (self-identified as female):

And I don't have issues with you being a feminist lady. **But I don't take kindly to your invasion of this fine gaming culture** we got going here using a false pretense.

This is not about gaming or protecting female rights, or *heaven forbid male rights*.

This is a motherfucking heist. You know jack shit about gaming, its currents, undercurrents or problems. You just want to feel important. I don't even want you on the peripheries of gaming. I want you out of here! Preach your bullshit elsewhere! (YouTube comment, 16 June, 2012, emphasis added)

Instead of engaging in an actual debate about the content or validity of Sarkeesian's Kickstarter project, this gamer (and many, many others) resorted to petty, superficial fights with other gamers who 'sided' with her message or perceived intent.

It is precisely because of the NHL and Sarkeesian examples that I set out to examine the comments sections of gaming articles. The previously mentioned, and thoroughly hashed out below, #GamerGate movement only solidified my belief in the importance of my project goals. The Sarkeesian example is just one of many I have seen throughout the intersection of my time as a gamer and a critical feminist academic. It is clear that such critical feminist work needs to be done. Furthermore, the examination of public comment sections for research data is also not a wide practice in cultural studies, but I argue and hope to begin to establish that it should be the new trend in digital culture research for exactly the reasons discussed here. By continuing to ignore the active role the male gamer plays in fostering acerbic gaming identities like these in

preference for non-participant research that is quicker and easier to conduct, we (as digital gaming scholars) only perpetuate the idea that academics should remain objective and withdrawn from real-life issues.

Online Space Related Literature Review

While I will not be able to tailor this literature review as specifically to video games as I did with the previous case study, I will focus on digital culture more broadly. With regard to comment section analysis, in the last couple of years there has been a boom in academic interest. However, this has come primarily with regard to studying the ways in which comment sections on online news sites have been used. Methodologically speaking, this will still be very useful in my discussion as many of the researchers have also looked at the role of emotion in their samples. The review that follows will thus focus on existing studies that examine online comment sections from quite a few different perspectives across many disciplines. Fundamental in this review is the link made by Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) to the idea that news comment sections function as a new media ‘public sphere’, which is reflected in several additional studies of news sites (e.g., Blom, Carpenter, Bowe, & Lange, 2014; Da Silva, 2013; Hughey & Daniels, 2013). What distinguishes the study by Toepfl and Piwoni (2015), however, is their argument that discursive comments in these spaces resemble counterpublics, an argument I made in an earlier paper. Thus, the latter half of this review concentrates on an expanded discussion of Fraser’s (2007) extension of the Habermasian public sphere to examine subaltern counter-publics as a way of understanding digital gaming spaces. Before moving on to the specifics of this case study, then, I will review pop news coverage of the mid- to late-2014 #GamerGate events and how those further extend the need for this type of critical feminist study. I move now to a review of relevant comment analysis studies.

Comment Analysis as Digital Culture Method

I have found very interesting themes amongst one subset of this type of scholarship on comment section analyses. For one, the majority of studies are conducted using social scientific methodology, and are heavily quantitative and positivist, and for another, which is likely paired with the authors' attempts at objectivity, the studies are largely framed around the degree to which participants display "incivility" in online spaces. As I have conducted my work for this dissertation, I have had a very hard time refraining from reacting emotionally to the comment sections and posts I've read throughout my research. My personal reactions inspired my argument about the emotionally charged ways people interact in comments and on forums – and if this is how I feel, how could it not be a more ubiquitous experience? I find discussing rampant hostility, racism, and sexism in comment sections as simply examples of "incivility" to be irresponsible scholarship and a good example of when academics should abandon objectivity. This section of the lit review is broken up into several sections. First, I open with a brief discussion of the way emotion and affect have been examined in comment sections, followed by a discussion of the aforementioned examination of incivility in commenting and the relation between political discussion and the public sphere. This leads into my grounding of that literature in a more thorough discussion of the public sphere in the ensuing section.

Affect and emotion in comment sections. In their study on variation of news and social media portals, Arapakis, Lalmas, Cambazoglu, Marcos, and Jose (2014), also studied the way sentiments were exploited and appealed to in the comment sections. They found that female participants were more likely to be interested in user comments on articles than were their male participants. In general, they also noted positive affect – via interest, engagement, and enjoyment – for participants who read user comments. While Arapakis et al (2014) use affect and emotion

interchangeably, as happens in many studies, their findings that female participants engaged with comment sections is relevant to this study. Additionally, Burri, Baujard, and Etter (2006) also found that more frequent users of online forums were the women in their sample, who did so for emotional support.

Barnes (2013) also examined the roles of affect and emotion with regard to comment sections in her research on an Australian website. Here, Barnes lays out a very specific and well stated understanding of the different ways affect are used in scholarship – both as conflated with emotion and as “a social and sometimes collective instigator of directing energy or engagement” as explained by Deleuze (Barnes, 2013, p. 815). She further explains her use of affect through Wetherell’s (2012, ctd in Barnes, 2013) concept of affective practice.

‘Affective practice’ offers two approaches for the exploration of how the audience relates to alternative journalism websites. Firstly, there may be an emotional reaction or a feeling of being up in the ‘affective practice’ that is encouraged by the website content.

Secondly, a particular ‘affective practice’ can also inspire action, such as the leaving of a comment. (Barnes, 2013, p. 815).

This concept has vast potential for understanding user engagement with online comment sections. However, it does require participant-engagement in order to access users’ feelings and their motivations for posting to sites. Barnes (2013) further frames her discussion around the concepts of fandom and community building, concluding that user-engagement with the news site in her study does share characteristics with fandom communities with emotional elements.

In their study, Sood, Churchill, and Antin (2012) found that certain emotional content could be contagious for users. When more negative commenting was present, it had the potential to influence additional negative contributions – or avoidance all together. Along these same

lines, both Weber (2014) and Tenenboim and Cohen (2015) attempted to study what drove users to comment on various articles in the first place. Both studies found support for arguing that users are motivated to post based on sensationalism and commonality with existing comments. Furthermore, Ziegele, Breiner, and Quiring (2014), found that controversial comments, in addition to those featuring aggression, were more likely than non-controversial comments to elicit additional responses. These studies begin to blend with the next form this type of scholarship takes. While this group of literature does not explicitly discuss affect or emotion in the manner this previous subset has, their use of the terms “civil” or “uncivil” do appear to take the place of a more overt discussion of emotional response. This group also features quite a few studies who engage the concept of the public sphere in their theoretical grounding – perhaps adding an additional element as to why they avoid emotion for the sake of ‘civil political discourse’.

Incivility in political comment sections. Blom et al. (2014) performed a quantitative content analysis of the comment sections of 15 different US news sites to examine the levels of civility of comments based on frequency of posts by users. They found that most posters were civil in their contributions and that those who were less likely to use uncivil language were those who posted more frequently. Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014) reported similar findings in their study of local news sites – more frequent commenters were more likely to be civil than were less frequent commenters. Da Silva (2013) further noted the overwhelming lack of civility in her study of political comments on Brazilian election articles, but also called for increased engagement and moderation of the conversations that take place in comment sections for the purpose of more productive and directed conversation. Of these studies treating civility in some way, Reader (2012) was one of the few who acknowledged the subjective manner of the term

“civility”. He examined the differences between journalists’ views on anonymity in commenting compared to the way users see it, reinforcing existing literature on the way users equate anonymity with such ideals as freedom of speech. However, he also found that journalists equated anonymous commenting and trolling with “filth” and incivility.

As per Da Silva (2013), a logical response to the levels of incivility, hostility, whatever one would call it, in the comment sections of online articles would be a call for increased moderation. Hlavach and Freivogal (2011) further this point by questioning the ethical choices of news outlets who allow this type of commentary online but would never print it physically. On the other hand, in their study of racist online comments, Hughey and Daniels (2013) highlight the way comment moderation and the closing of comment sections has caused methodological dilemmas and reduced scholars’ ability to study these cultural concerns. They argue that comment moderation inserts a gatekeeper between the poster and the public – gatekeepers who at times apply filters in ways that ascribe to dominant racist ideology. However, as Canter (2013) found in her study, while news organizations acknowledged how damaging these negative comments can be to their reputations, they still uphold their users’ rights to free speech.

Digital extensions of the public sphere. Before I move on to a more thorough overview of the public sphere and my argument that it is Fraser’s extension of subaltern counter-publics that applies most closely to digital culture, especially in relation to gaming, I will review some of the literature from this subset of comment analysis scholarship that engages Habermas’ concept. First and foremost, in her groundbreaking article, Papacharissi (2002) details several different ways in which the Internet itself functions as a public sphere. Though she isn’t specifically discussing comment sections, this article is still extremely fitting within this section of literature. She further articulates the connection between Habermas’ public sphere and what she calls the

“virtual sphere”, with a connection to members of the capitalist bourgeois that each concept share – property holders in the public sphere, computer holders in the virtual (Papacharissi, 2002). With remarkable foreshadowing, she concludes that potential exists for the study of the virtual sphere for the way political communication as it operates in these digital spaces.

Loke (2012) frames her discussion of online comments around the way the public sphere has changed as online journalism has become more widespread, providing a far-reaching digital space for public discourse. In a similar vein, Strandberg and Berg (2013) couch their discussion of democratic discussion and online citizens in one focusing on a digital public sphere. In an interesting take on this type of research, instead of talking about online comment sections in general, Valtysson (2012) extends the discussion of a virtual sphere to talking about the way Facebook functions. However, not all scholars who examine the overlaps between digital space and the public sphere support this extension. For example, Chaves (2010) argues that doing so treats the Internet as if it were without border or boundaries, which inhibits the conditions necessary to the public sphere. Furthermore, she contends that this also ignores the fact that Internet is materially constructed (Chaves, 2010). In a similar vein, Goldberg (2010) also questions the functionality and validity of a virtual sphere.

Finally, returning to the research I highlighted in the opening of this lit review, Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) make one of the more overt and clear connections between their research and an emerging digital public sphere and one of the few also to discuss the potential for counterpublics. The authors use a mixed methods approach to analyzing comment sections for the manner in which political talk operated amongst users. Again, the focus of the study is on overly political conversations, but Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) clearly explain the way discursive

responses within comment sections break way from superordinate public spheres to create counterpublics – the first study of its kind to use counterpublic theory in this manner.

Habermas' Public Sphere and Fraser's Subaltern Counter-Publics

According to Habermas (2006), “the public sphere” suggests a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed, which involves private individuals forming a public body (73). The public sphere does not exist simply because a group of people come together, rather it comes into being through the purposeful participation of the people involved (Habermas, 2006). It became a significant arena for public discourse in early bourgeois society because many people (such as merchants) were excluded from formal political institutions and sought discussion through public mass media, such as newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and clubs (Ray, 1993). The resulting public sphere was one in which those excluded private people came together to perform democratic discourse and engage in civic communication in an attempt to generate (an assumed) public opinion (Habermas, 2006; Ray, 1993), and serve as a platform to then demand public rights (McGuigan, 1996).

Habermas' definition of the public sphere has been challenged multiple times and still remains highly contested amongst scholars (see Fiig, 2011; and Warnick & Heineman, 2012, for a meta-analysis of such criticisms). According to Ray (1993), one of the major drawbacks (as also noted by many other critics) was that the public sphere was unrealistically utopian and seemed most effective when the ‘body’ of the public sphere was homogenous. From a technological perspective, Warnick and Heineman (2012) contend that the increased uses of new media add to the growing disputes about what constitutes a public sphere(s). However, one of the most noted critics of Habermas would be Nancy Fraser. Fraser (2007) critiques and expands upon Habermas' original conception of the public sphere, arguing that there is not just one ‘bourgeois

public sphere', but that there are multiple public spheres. Furthermore, she adds that additional criticisms of Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere were that it "rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions" including gender and class (491). Additionally, Habermas idealizes the liberal public sphere and does not engage any other competing public spheres to contrast, and also promotes a false equality of the private individuals in the public sphere (Fraser, 2007).

Fraser (2007) proposes the existence of multiple public spheres; particularly what she calls "subaltern counter-publics" developed by subordinated social groups that previously fell outside of Habermas' narrow definition of the bourgeois public sphere (497). A very convincing example of one such subaltern counter-public is that of the US feminist subaltern counter-public (497-498). She is quick to note that, in contrast to Habermas, she is under no false impression that all public spheres are virtuous in their intentions and actions, with the common good at heart. Additionally, according to Fraser (2007) "public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities" (499). Therefore, because of the public spheres' ties to identity, and the vast cultural differences that exist within them, there cannot be simply one, single public sphere, and the public spheres can work in competition with one another.

It is in keeping with Fraser's (2007) argument that I would claim that gamer culture has developed (or is developing) as a sort of pseudo-subaltern counter-public. It is not without caution that I make such a bold claim, for I would never presume to liken the US feminist struggles (or those of other socially and politically oppressed groups of people) to those that occur within the gaming community. However, gaming culture was, at least originally, a subaltern form of geek culture with which not a great number of people wanted to readily

associate (McQuivey, 2001; Winkler, 2006). Additionally, prevalent stereotyping still exists about the lack of social skills possessed by gamers and the “lives in their mom’s basement” identity, with critics attempting to ambiguously dispel those myths (Shaw, 2010). While popularity of the culture and identity has been on the rise, Habermas’ and, especially, Fraser’s articulations of the public sphere(s) are relevant for studying the way these identities are constructed and reinforced in a digital public sphere.

Gaming and the public sphere. Although it has not been argued previously, there are several implications for discussing the virtual sphere as it relates to gaming and the development of gamer identity. However, specifically defining gamer identity and gamer culture is a complicated matter. In a criticism of video game scholarship, H. Thornham (2011) argues that, while it is vast and continues to grow, this field of research “rarely addresses what we could call the cultures and contexts of gaming” because much video game research is still stuck on justifying its existence as a worthy area of study (7). However, Shaw (2010) argues that it is not possible to define a gamer culture because it cannot be boiled down to any set cultural definition. Additionally, she maintains that previous attempts to define ‘video game culture’ and ‘gamers’ limits the potential for critical scholarly work that is meaningful, and that actually defining this culture has implications for how games are then studied and related to a broader cultural context. Furthermore, she explains that most definitions of culture appear to be problematically depicted as ‘common sense’ or ‘matter-of-fact’ rather than really broken down and explained.

To support her criticism of defining video game culture, Shaw (2010) analyzed US-based publications’ depictions of video game play, text, and practices, using both news sources (i.e., *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *the Washington Post*) and academic articles discussing video games and game theory (406-407). A few key points she makes

reinforce H. Thornham's (2011) observations about the types of video game research being conducted. Shaw (2010) identified three primary themes of research and news topics – focus was placed on who plays video games (e.g., the gamer), what they play (e.g., the game), and how they play (e.g., play practices). Throughout her analysis, she identifies a plethora of contradictions across her data, using this to support her argument that a consistent definition of video game culture is not attainable. She likens the study of video games to that of any other type of media, and concludes with a call to model video game cultural studies after Fiske's 1989 book *Television Culture*, which "situates the codes and representations of television within larger social and cultural ideological structures" (415) and to study video games *in* culture and not *as* culture (416).

However convincing the data provided by and the arguments made by Shaw (2010), I would disagree that addressing a definition of video game culture is as problematic as she describes – at least in the way that she does. She eventually concludes that any attempt at doing so must come from a cultural studies perspective, and while I will ultimately be addressing video game culture and gamer identity development from such a perspective, I do still believe a project that falls outside this area is still possible and worthwhile. However, my primary reason for disagreeing with Shaw's (2010) argument was that at the time of publication, her most recent sources for analysis are still over six years old, however with the continued advancement of video game console technology they may as well have been sixty years old. The academic articles she uses in her analysis were only published as late as 2006, meaning that given the typical amount of time it takes to get an academic article published, they include arguments about video games and gamers before the release of the Sony Playstation 3 (late 2006 in US), the Nintendo Wii (late 2006 in US), and possibly even the Microsoft Xbox 360 (late 2005 in US).

This is extremely important because this line of video game consoles was the first to fully incorporate online communities into the console's core gaming functions. By the time of publication, each console had its own online community (e.g., Sony's Playstation 3 has the Playstation Network while Microsoft's Xbox 360 has Xbox Live) and online multi-player functionality, significantly changing the way console gamers played their games and interacted with other gamers – which simultaneously significantly impacts how video game culture and gamers can come to be defined.²⁵

Finally, other than invoking a call to conduct video game research from a cultural studies perspective, Shaw (2010) she does not discuss much theory or the theoretical implications of the articles she uses. By avoiding doing so, she shuts the reader out from gaining another perspective into why defining video game culture is so complicated. Additionally, she also falls into the trap of identifying a problem with a particular sect of academic research without proposing or addressing any specific type of solution. I disagree that defining video game culture is impossible, and furthermore that defining gamer identity is as well. Gamers frequently use online communities to develop, foster, and reinforce said identity. The manner in which this happens has implications for treating these online communities as if they comprise a growing virtual public sphere in a Habermasian sense. More specifically, though, the online forums, news article comment sections, and discussion boards that help to create these spaces for a gamer identity development that fosters a gaming culture-as-subculture reflect Fraser's (2007) subaltern counter-public in many ways.

²⁵ Xbox Live was originally incorporated into the Microsoft Xbox in 2002, but it was significantly revamped for the 360 network.

Gaming-Related Studies of Online Commenting

One of the most prominent scholars in this field is without a doubt Mia Consalvo, so it is not surprising that, wholly or in part, she has authored the studies of the intersections of digital culture, fandom, and gaming. Dutton, Consalvo, and Harper (2011) studied the way fans responded to criticisms by Fox News on the popular video game *Mass Effect*. Quite similar to the way in which I have set up my case studies, they used gaming sites, forums, and YouTube to examine the ways fans responded to the conservative critique. The additional element of ‘review bombing’, which I would argue as a form of hacktivism, of the Fox News segment’s featured author’s book on Amazon was also used in the study. They found that the different venues elicited different types of responses and levels of emotional expression. The Amazon reviews were the most civil, while the blogs, videos, and other comments were described as ranging from satirical to aggressive to using a “whirlwind of invectives” (Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011, p. 298). What’s of extreme relevance is the way the authors describe the changing landscape of fandom with regard to gaming.

[B]eing a fan now means many different things, some of them contradictory. We cannot so easily distinguish fans from ‘the media’, as often they are one and the same. Fans can produce more professional (Kotaku) and less professional (remix parody videos) media themselves, and can rapidly and globally articulate their discontent with other media makers... Fans can also sow seeds of discord through misogynist, rage-filled and boorish activities. Just as some fans work to dispel stereotypes of the typical game player, others play right into such images. (Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011, p. 303).

Adding a further level of speculation to the changing nature of fandom, Consalvo (2012) discusses the increasingly toxic nature of gamer culture. Here she discusses the Sarkeesian

events as well as additional examples of backlash against women in gaming, including an event from an August 2010 Penny Arcade comic about “dickwolves” and rape. She argues that this trend is representative of a specifically hostile environment toward women despite the changing nature of ‘the gamer’ and prevalence of gaming systems, genres, and platforms. Central to her argument about what drives this type of behavior is sexism and fear of the way the gaming industry is changing. Her article serves as a call to feminist game studies scholars to engage in research that attempts to not only understand, but also expose these issues within the culture through increased analysis, as well as documentation and archiving of digital artifacts that would serve as evidence of this toxicity. This dissertation project hopes to contribute to that call to action.

#GamerGate: Or, My God, #ICan’tBelievethisHappenedWhileWritingmyDissertation

In all seriousness, though my primary inspiration for designing this dissertation project was the previously discussed backlash Sarkeesian endured, I would be remiss to forgo a discussion of GamerGate as well. According to Workman (2014) and Dockterman (2014a), GamerGate originated in August, 2014, with the #GamerGate Twitter conversation/war about conflicts in gaming journalism. Allegedly, the original intention of the dialogue was to bring to light the intimate relationship between a (female) game maker, Zoe Quinn, and a (male) gaming journalist, Nathan Grayson, who gave her little known indie game a glowing review. Thus, the misguided usage of the “-gate” extension to call back to the infamous Watergate scandal exposed by journalists Woodward and Bernstein. Since the initial firestorm that began with #GamerGate, however, a lot of different issues and splintered issues have come to light. An additional element of GamerGate is the ongoing desire to end political correctness in gaming that ‘ruins’ their existing nature and original intention. Suellentrop (2014) explains:

GamerGate widened its scope to include others perceived to be trying to cram liberal politics into video games. The movement uses the phrase “social justice warriors” to describe the game designers, journalists and critics who, among other alleged sins, desire to see more (and more realistic) representations of women and minorities. (para 6)

Many have argued that the events surrounding GamerGate have exposed the gaming community for what they really are – petty, misogynist, and spiteful.

[GamerGate] has led to criminal hacks, online threats of violence, and digital smear campaigns... It’s a new kind of digital nightmare, where anyone with an axe to grind and a big enough online megaphone can mobilize thousands of people, mostly anonymous, to use an arsenal of digital weapons to wage war on opponents. (Eördögh, 2014, para 2-3)

It was revealed that much of the inspiration for ‘outing’ Quinn came from a spiteful ex-boyfriend who published details of their past sexual relationship and whose claims about Grayson couldn’t be supported (Dockterman, 2014a). Female supporters of Quinn, such as Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu, were harassed across digital platforms, resulting in public appearance cancellations by Sarkeesian and abandonment of her home by Wu (Dockterman, 2014a; Rutkin, 2014; Wingfield, 2014). Even seemingly gamer ‘in-crowd’ and infamous geek-girl Felicia Day suffered harassment from GamerGaters after she posted her feelings about the ongoing turmoil faced by many female gamers and critics to Tumblr (Dockterman, 2014b).

Additionally, many non-gaming affiliated sites began to call for attention to and intervention in the alarmingly harsh culture. Poniewozik (2014) from *Time*, argued that this trend in misogynist digital abuse is everyone’s problem – even those outside of gaming. As a television critic, he drew parallels between various types of media critique and the online response to it, noting that he receives far different backlash than his female counterparts. Chris

Kluwe, formerly of the NFL Minnesota Vikings, also called out the clear sexism of GamerGate backlash when they doxxed Day, but left him mostly alone despite his calling them “basement-dwelling, Cheetos-huffing, poopsock-sniffing douchepistols” (as cited in Dockterman, 2014b).²⁶ Peckham (2014), also of *Time*, further drove this point with an appeal to the fact that this is happening in 2014, when people should be able to conduct themselves better. He further argues that this is about more than just gaming, as it happens in most if not all digital spaces, but that it’s no way to have any kind of productive dialogue – harassment will always shut down dialogue. Lawler (2015) from *USA Today*, pointed out her hesitance as a female journalist to mention online harassment or publish criticism online for fear of backlash. A concern I have shared, and one which prevents me from tweeting or engaging much with these types of non-academic, ‘real world’ events. I save my commentary for my scholarship, but...

Eventually, GamerGate’s reach extended to the academic world, where I would argue scholars tend to enjoy observation and discussion of societal conflict from a relatively safe distance in comparison to our journalist counterparts. In the only academic article published to date on GamerGate, Chess and Shaw (2015) shatter any illusions about the previously unexposed academic space of inquiry.

This is a story about how we – two feminist gaming scholars – became implicated in a conspiracy to destroy video games and the video game industry. We are sharing this story with the larger academic public... as a case study of a cultural moment in which masculine gaming culture became aware of and began responding to feminist game scholars (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 208).

²⁶ Doxxing refers to the publication of private identifying information, such as home address and personal phone number, with the intent of using that information to do harm to the person doxxed (Dockterman, 2014b).

The authors explained that at the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference in August 2014, out of an attempt to engage in open dialogue about ongoing concerns with such issues as GamerGate, a public Google Doc was used by participants in a session to take notes on the conversation. As the GD was public, it was eventually discussed on 4Chan and edited/commented on in a lot of various ways similar to what was experienced by any other person involved with GamerGate. GamerGaters were led to the GD by innocuous mentions of being at or involved with DiGRA by various new media professionals, as well as what appears to be some serious digital stalking of Shaw. All in all, what GamerGate did with this information, as Chess and Shaw (2015) argue, was essentially misunderstand, misconstrue, and turn it into a rather illogical conspiracy theory about feminist interventions into gaming culture. They conclude powerfully with why what happens supports the need for continued scholarship in this area. And it is with this that I will move on to my case study in this chapter.

Analysis and Discussion

When I coded my data, I really wasn't that surprised by the types of common responses I saw to the various "Feminist Whore" *Dead Island* (2011) articles and forums. Not only did these articles and forums foster a great deal of discussion, but they also elicited many emotional reactions to the articles and other posters. Well-being Emotions was the most varied main category of responses that I came across. As I analyzed, I further conceptualized the category in this way:

Well-being emotions – basic association with desirable or undesirable events.

This most often included comments about the way posters felt about the discovery of the trait, the treatment of the exposure, the handling of the apology, etc.

A second common main category was Article Association – which proved to be a rather problematic categorization of comments. I will discuss this further in the limitations section, as well as in my dissertation conclusion. Beyond main categories, the most prominent subcategories were Fortunes-of-Others emotions, Antagonism or Confrontation, and Defensive Statements. I redefined the way I was using Fortunes-of-Others as I coded to help further differentiate it from the latter two. I conceptualized these three categories as follows:

Fortunes-of-Others emotions – good-will emotions towards others. This could be an unidentified ‘other’ such as the company, other gamers, the article author, other commenters, or a social group (i.e., women and/or feminists).

Antagonism or Confrontation – ill-will emotions or actions toward others. This could be an unidentified ‘other’ such as the company, other gamers, the article author, other commenters, or a social group (i.e., women and/or feminists).

Defensive Statements – direct responses to the article or other posters in defense of oneself or implying personal offense to something that was said.

I’m including Fortunes-of-Others above to show its contrast against the other two, but there were very, very few of these types of comments so I won’t actually discuss it further. Another category developed over time as well, which I have named the Frozen Statement:

Frozen Statements – general calls to “Let it Go”, live and let live, move on with one’s life.

I replaced the Innocuous Response with this category on my final coding frame, as it seemed to fill in for that one quite a bit (see Appendix C).

The following write-up blends together several examples of the ways comments were coded throughout my analysis in combination with my observations about the ways

conversations developed around various themes. I've structured my discussion around the above categories to help better guide the way I not only discuss comments, but quote them – which more or less follows a 'from bad to worse' arrangement. Some of my primary arguments about gender, power, and emotion in gaming spaces are made here, while more are reserved for a less disjointed discussion, peppered with sample quotations, in the conclusion. I discuss the selected main categories, Frozen Statements and Well-Being Posts, first, before moving on to the more complicated elaboration of the subcategorization of Antagonism or Confrontation and Defensive Statements.

Frozen Statements

This main category could arguably be seen as the neutral one – with regard to both emotion and gender. Many of the responses coded into this category did not break down much further beyond this primary placement. Overall, I defined this category as the “primary theme of response is a general call to “Let it Go”, live and let live, move on with one’s life” – emphasis on “primary theme”. As with some of the other comments in my dataset, there was room to interpret what exactly the author was getting at with their comment (especially if they didn’t engage in any additional discussion), so I had to make a judgement call as to how strongly I felt a comment fell into one category or another. The Frozen statements did tend to me somewhat easier to categorize, as many of them followed very similar structures, for example:

“lol, its just a silly dev working title for a perk, obviously there was a reason it got changed. Quit reading too far into things, was obviously some sort of in-office joke that was never meant to see the light of day.” –H*****r, *IGN*

Here, the poster isn’t making any real statement about the article itself or engaging with the author or other posters – they’re simply stating their opinion that this was a non-issue. I could

quote several more posts like this, but I'd prefer to save room for the more controversial ones to come.

Although I said this category could be seen as neutral with regard to gender and emotion, I don't quite believe it is neutral with regard to power. Here, there is a hint of privilege with regard to not being offended and easily moving on from this situation. Purna's character is at the center of this controversy (and many topics of conversation throughout the comments and forums), and she is coded female, black, and, as I argued in the last chapter, potentially queer. She's an intersectional character not often seen in video games, let alone a primary playable character in a major franchise. So the power to dismiss the potential for insult in finding this damaging code does speak to a disassociation with this type of identity, which leaves room for inferring what that says about gender as well. The other main category I'll highlight is the Well-Being post.

Well-Being Posts

These posts, though technically fewer in number than the Article Association main category, were still one of the most prominent themes amongst the comments. Here, I found that posters generally tried to talk about the game creator and associated companies in various types of ways – both positive and negative. There were several breakout themes that emerged as I read through comments and forum posts, and then tried to soak in the conversations that surrounded the comments that fell into this category. I begin with an example of the more basic well-being comment:

“There is no audience for this! That's the point ... Basically, you have to break into the code to see it.

It's like if a carpenter wrote something racist on the lumber used to build a set for a movie - the people watching the movie can't see it, don't know it's there, and it doesn't make the maker of the movie racist.” –A*****k, *Kotaku*

Here, the commenter was upset that the controversy was actually being covered at all. But, unlike the neutrality of the Frozen Statements, posts that fell into this category often employed exclamatory language and punctuation, implying a heightened intensity of response. The post I highlighted at the beginning of the chapter also falls into this main category, because it's expressing an overall reaction to the events surrounding the controversy with a degree of emotional involvement in the response. The first subcategorization that grew out of performing this case study was an attempt to address the "PC Police", or posting something that in some way implies the only reason anyone would be upset is because they're attempting to be too politically correct or that our society in general is too politically correct to have fun. This is an example of an extremely common post within this categorization:

"What happened to the world? Nobody can take a joke anymore. Everything has to be politically correct now :(– G****t, *Gamerant*

Many posts that fell into this area followed a very similar formula – lament about the state of [insert region], accusations about a lack of humor in said region, and then some reference to political correctness in some way. These often ranged between emotionally neutral and expressive of more negative emotions (e.g., anger, bitterness, and resentment).

An interesting type of comment that fell into this main category was one that attempted to see something good out of the situation, some growth on the part of the company:

"I don't see the problem. They came up with the name for the skill, decided against it at some point for whatever reason, removed it from the game and overlooked a file where it has no influence on the game.

The fact that they decided against using the name should speak in their favor, shouldn't it?

edit:

to clarify, I don't say that the name "Feminist Whore" is ethical and ok. I'm saying that these guys probably realized this themselves and decided to remove it. It's not uncommon

for source code or other files in games to still have references to features that never made it into the final game.” –E****r, *Eurogamer.net*

“It seems this has been dealt with in a fairly reasonable manner. Of course, one could debate _why_ the Gender Wars skill even exists at all in the game (and why Purna didn't make like Angelina Jolie's character in _Salt_ and ditch the heels at first opportunity for more practical footwear).” –R***o, *Gamespot*

Here, these authors were acknowledging that the company did step in and do something about the cod, as well as address the community in some way or another. There is an implication of a more professional respect by those whose posts fell into this area. These were also typically hovering slightly between neutral and positive emotional response, as well.

The final type of comment I will discuss that fell into this category was one that could be described as displaying a general lack of concern, mixed with mild insults. A couple of examples of this type of comment are below:

“Yeah, I read this earlier today. I don't understand why some people are up in arms. The use the F-word in the game gratuitously, so I don't think where is that bad. Personally, I think it's funny, the only people who wouldn't be amused by it are feminists...and how likely are they to play this game?” –S*****l, *DeadIslandForums.com*

“Nobody is offended the black girl called "you" a ****ing git in the intro movie? And Feminists would be offended, they get offended with everything; their whole movement is a scam.

Didn't show up in the game per say, so why care? If anything it's funny.” –d****b, *DeadIslandForums.com*

Overall, these types comments could have theoretically fallen into the Frozen Statements category, but I maintain that neutrality in emotion and discussion of gender is key to that category overall. These comments only serve as examples of the many more like it, and are not emotionally neutral. They are conveying an emotional response in one way or another, and have the added element supporting their ‘who cares’ attitudes with misunderstandings of feminism and implications that they’re the only ones who would or should ‘care’.

This category demonstrates a movement toward the overlap of gender, power, and emotion. The various breakout subcategories here all involve gender and emotional investment in some way. Furthermore, much like with the Frozen Statements, there is an implication of the way power operates in this culture. People do not have the right to be upset about this controversy, because it's *just* a game, made for a particular audience that does not welcome or include feminists who may be offended. It also reflects a certain level of respect for capitalist enterprises, in that the few more positive statements I observed focused around applauding the company, who employed the coder in the first place, for stepping in and publicly distancing itself from the sexism implied by this incident. However, as I discussed earlier in this dissertation, two years later this company was also responsible for using the bloodied, dismembered torso of a bikini-clad, heavily endowed female as a special incentive for fans to buy a more expensive version of the sequel to this game. Power here, then, not only operates at the level of the gamer and the culture they're involved in developing, but also the way the company is able to help shape it as well.

Defensive Statements

I will now move on to discussing the specific subcategories from my coding frame that produced the most coded comments. For this subcategory, I had defined it as statements in direct response to the article or other posters in defense of oneself or implying personal offense to something that was said. There were several emergent themes throughout this subcategory, as well. To begin, however, here are a couple examples of some more broadly identified defensive statements:

“Lighten up bro, most feminists are ***** anyway. And anyone who gets all self righteous about a word should be flogged for being way to overly sensitive.” –
P*****A, *GameFAQs board*

“This says more about that one programmer than it does about the game. This sort of thing doesn't bother me personally, but it does bother me professionally; the games industry isn't an extension of the frat house anymore.” –K*****i, *Gamespot*

These comments represent two different ways in which defensives statements could operate amongst the posts. First, the top comment is a direct response to someone else, in which the poster is getting defensive about the way another poster is challenging their use of sexist language. The second is an example of a person taking personal offense with regard to the event in general, and expressing their distaste. Both can be read as an understanding of the way gender, power, and emotion operate. Specifically, each includes crude gender stereotypes – as the assumption here is that the top commenter is ridiculing women while the bottom men – and both are constructed in a way that implies genuine emotional response.

One of the themes that emerged throughout this comment section is one of the more representative types of comments often cited in backlash against almost any kind of feminist media critique. Mainly, that of the rather typical Mens' Rights Activist slant. For example:

“switch it round and it wouldnt be an issue.” c*****m, Eurogamer.net

Here, the implication is that no one would care if the code were making fun of one of the male characters instead, the only reason people are upset is that this targets one of the female characters. This could overlap with the PC Police subcategorization above, but comments that fell into this category were almost always framed in such a way as to be defensive specifically of masculine identity and not political correctness at large. The play between gender and power is clear here, but emotions varied greatly. The example comment above is quite neutral in its expression, while others were not nearly as tame.

Finally, I found very few like this, but I still really wanted to include it because of the way it fell into the gender, power, and emotion overlap in this setting. With these posts, there is

an attempt on the part of some commenters to educate fellow posters, which was quite compelling. For example:

“Feminism is about pointing out inequalities wherever they exist, whether they're about gender, sexual preference, race, or anything else. "blaming men" only happens when it's relevant.

You should try learning about what it actually is, and maybe you'd get a little bit more sex yourself. <3” – R**e, *Gamerant*

“Feminism is the simple act of believing in equality. Most of you are in fact feminists. Stop thinking it means something completely different.” –S*****r, *Kotaku*

Many of these posts came either at the beginning or end of a diatribe in which the concept of feminism was abused greatly by the original poster. These were most often responses directly to other posters and rarely continued a discussion of the actual article itself. Much like the MRA themed defensive statements, these too ranged in emotionality.

Antagonism or Confrontation

I reserved this subcategory for the end of my discussion because it was, without a doubt, the most prominent one I saw throughout my entire collection of comments and posts. A decent percentage of the posts in this subcategory focused exclusively on feminist, who were attacked and demonized throughout the comments on every site I visited. The fact that the controversial skill used the word feminist only served to perpetuate the extremely mistaken way in which the term is understood by the public at large. These following examples are amongst several of the more common ‘types’ of comments that appears in this categorization. Emotionally speaking, they seemed to range all over within the global category, though most of them fell to the negative side.

Common comments included those who perpetuate the idea that feminists are anti-sex and could therefore never be considered whores:

“I think the term is misleading and just plain wrong. Seriously
 "feministwhore"...feminists are far too busy blaming males for everything bad in the
 world and their lives to actually have sex.” A*****A, *Gamerant*

Or that they are the exact opposite of anti-sex:

“i love the Feminist they act all uptight but in the bed room they love to be called a w
 hore.” –t*****d, *Gamerant*

Several of the comments I have already cited in this chapter also threw the term “feminist” around in a manner of different ways. Once again, the play between gender and power is clear in these examples. However, what was most intriguing was the emotional context of most of these posts – as I said, they ranged but were predominantly negative. It was through this subcategory that I saw the most commonality with my preliminary analysis of the NHL comment section, the posts to Sarkeesian’s various videos and articles about her, as well as the tweets I read involved in the #GamerGate movement. There is not just anger here, there’s what could almost be described as abject hatred for these disembodied feminists that the authors repeatedly refer to. What’s really interesting is that this controversy was a mild one, not covered too extensively, not capable of far-reaching political implications, and not long-lasting (comment traffic died within a week, if not days, of the original article or forum posts). Yet, this still elicited extremely emotional and aggressive posting to call out horrible feminists for daring to object to the degrading “Feminist Whore” label on an otherwise powerful protagonist.

In addition to the inclusion of gendered discussions in this subcategory, there were many other comments that furthered the use of prejudicial language and violence. Some examples of this include:

“Personally, I'd have no problem if all the "offended people" everywhere went ahead and killed themselves to alleviate their suffering. Pain-in-the-ass. The "whore" stuff reminded of that Lenny Bruce observation : "If JFK presented all the black members of his cabinet

on TV by saying "Have you met this n****r²⁷? And that n****r ? This n****r, n****r, n****r, n****r..." Then no black kid would cry because someone called him a n****r at school. " Euphemism treadmill, and all that." –j*****7, *FemWho* video response

"It isn't exactly a massive surprise that computer games are developed by sexist nerds whose idea of a perfect woman lies in their internet histories from late at night is it. The developer is an idiot, the words are offensive, it will be dealt with internally - end of story." –K*****h, *IGN*

Here the comments perpetuate prejudice or use prejudicial language in such a way as to leave no other impression but that it was done purposefully for the sake of doing so. In the top comment, there were a lot of racist and racialized comments throughout these comment sections. One of the primary reasons for this was likely the fact that Purna wasn't just a female, she was a black female, as I've stated previously. So posters were quick to argue the flipside or utilize race in same way to either justify or excuse what was said. Furthermore, the top commenter also employed another very typical type of response – encouraging/hoping/wishing death upon people who may have been offended by the controversy.

Conclusion

This chapter set up and performed my second case study in which I analyzed the commentary of actual gamers in digital non-gaming spaces. These spaces are pivotal in the gaming community, as a great deal of the development of fandom occurs here. I focused a great deal early in this chapter on the way the public sphere can be extended into digital spaces, which I plan to address more thoroughly in my conclusion. Moreover, I will discuss of my results in more detail in my concluding chapter, in which I will also address each of my research concerns. The analysis performed for this chapter, combined with that of the last, help to answer these

²⁷ This word was not originally censored like this in the original post, it was spelled out each time. I was originally going to leave it as is, but I just couldn't bring myself to print it.

questions in a more specific manner with respect to my larger concern with feminist, cultural studies and digital culture theoretical implications.

Chapter-Specific Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study apply more broadly to my project in general. This case study was a massive undertaking – especially for just one piece of my dissertation project. By only using myself as a coder, I did suffer from coding fatigue on and off throughout the process especially with my decision against using software assistance. There is also the potential for errors within my data. I archived all of the comment sections and forums I used onto simple, searchable Word documents. For this project, I had five individual files to work with because some of the larger comment sections wouldn't copy over as well into an existing 'compiled comments' document. The largest of these was the Kotaku article doc, which had over 730 comments and expanded into approximately 250 pages, though some of the pagination could be explained by the extra space taken up by ID pictures and embedded images in comments.

In the future, this one case study would make for an excellent standalone project using comment analysis – in a very similar vein to those cited throughout my literature review. However, I would have constructed my coding frame in a slightly different way. I feel as though I should have taken a data-driven, rather than a concept-driven approach to constructing my coding frame, as I several themes that weren't part of my original coding frame emerged throughout (Schreier, 2012). This may have helped me to better tailor my categories and subcategories to fit this particular subset of the gaming community, the survival-horror fans. Additionally, the aforementioned second common main category, Article Association, became unwieldy the longer I was immersed in my dataset. This has a lot to do with the fact that, as common sense should have predicted, the vast majority of all primary comments either agreed or

disagreed with the article and then proceeded to fall into subcategories from there – which proved to be a rather problematic categorization of comments.

CHAPTER VI – OPENING UP, BEFORE POWERING DOWN: WEAVING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY INTO A DISSERTATION CONCLUSION

Games are beautiful, they are creative, they are worlds to immerse yourself in. They are art. And they are worth fighting for, even if the atmosphere is ugly right now... So to myself and to everyone else who operates out of love not vengeance: Don't abandon games. Don't cross the street. Gaming needs you. To create, to play, to connect. (Day, 2014).

Introduction

I haven't always considered myself a gamer. In fact, since starting this project, I don't know that I've ever questioned claiming that identity more. As I explained in my introduction, a good portion of my childhood was spent playing video games – it was a product of having such young parents, with so many young children clustered around the same age. I honestly believe they just didn't know what to do with us at times, but were 'hip' enough to realize having a Nintendo was a pretty great way to get us to be quiet and play together (for the most part).²⁸ I played with an original Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), its successor, the Super Nintendo, and the original Sony Playstation well into my early teens. But then... I stopped. I lost almost complete interest in video games until it overlapped with the pastime that has held my focus longest: boys.

In late high school, I played Grand Theft Auto online with a boyfriend a year ahead of me. I was terrible, but he was a computer nerd and got a kick out of my interests in his hobby. In undergrad, I resurrected my dated NES and Super Nintendo skills to play with my boyfriend at the time and other friends in our apartment complex. Mario Kart was the fan favorite there. But it wasn't until my master's program, when I met my partner, that I had ever considered myself any kind of 'gamer', any kind of person who put effort into constructing and nurturing an identity

²⁸ Although, my mom notoriously beat many of our games before we did and put the effort into buying official game guides.

built around my engagement with a particular hobby. Here again, we played old Nintendo games, bonding over the similarities in our childhood experiences with the now ancient systems. He delighted in introducing me to the newest Nintendo system – the Nintendo Wii – and then newer handhelds, the Nintendo DS, DSi, and finally 3DS. And together we eventually branched out to purchase new consoles in the Sony line, the Playstation 3 (and eventually 4), and the newest Nintendo console, the Wii U.

It was through my partner that I experienced new styles of gameplay, new systems, new technologies, and a ridiculous amount of emotionality in and dedication to my play. We built what I have previously referred to as a long distance gaming relationship (LDGR) throughout a five year long period of geographic distance.²⁹ We utilized online gaming to bridge the 1,000+ mile and multiple time zone span between us, and help keep ourselves sane through that uncharacteristically long period of time to be apart in a relationship. And though we used gaming to maintain our closeness and have fun with digital dating, I also played on my own. I embraced the hobby as my own, and not simply a product of our union.

Developing a gamer identity, claiming a mantle like that, depends on so much more than simply owning systems and playing them frequently. If that were the case, I could have called myself a gamer throughout many parts of my life – as could have my sisters and my mom, whom I know never would. Being a gamer involves emotion. Emotion beyond that experienced while playing, beyond mere affection for a particular title or character, beyond brand preference or loyalty. It's emotion tied to caring enough about the community and support for it that you can be driven to act on said emotion – in whatever form that may take. That can be as simple as taking the effort to consistently read and seek out new information or as complicated as hacking

²⁹ I have written about my LDGR in seminar papers and presented on it in an invited conference talk during my doctoral program.

a game to change the characters or story for the better. Or, hacking the personal information of someone you feel is targeting the community in an attempt to destroy it.

Throughout this project, many of my previous assumptions about the gaming community were challenged as much as they were reinforced. Pouring through comments on news articles, reading up on #GamerGate, and doing so through a critical academic lens made me feel disconnected from the community, like I didn't just slack off on maintaining the gamer identity, but that I didn't belong in the first place. However, I was also forced to revisit my personal history, the history so briefly detailed above and peppered throughout this dissertation. And I may not be as active as I used to be, but I am a gamer. I care about what is happening to this community – both from within and without. I opened this chapter with a quote that encapsulates this struggle quite well – the pain of straddling the knowledge that this community is capable of very ugly things but simultaneously caring about my fit within it and desire to continue to do so (Day, 2014).

The comments and discussion forum posts used in the second case study helped to better ground the way I had originally hoped to look at the way gender, power, and emotion operate in gaming culture. Admittedly, I looked at a very small subset of this culture, using a very specific artifact. However, given the way I was able to find commonalities between my study and observations of online experiences of similarly charged events in gaming culture, I believe this fits well into existing literature about toxic gaming culture (see Consalvo, 2012). Furthermore, with the manner in which I had immersed myself in *Dead Island* for the first case study, I was able to better *feel* like a part of the more specialized community I was studying.

As I conclude this dissertation, I will reiterate some of my primary findings from both case studies, discuss fit with my theoretical grounding and primary media effects influences, and

address my research concerns. Throughout my discussion of my theoretical foundation, I made note of two specific areas that I felt most appropriately ‘fit’ my project – Mulvey’s (1992) male gaze and Fraser’s subaltern counter-publics. I will discuss each of these in turn as they came out of my case study findings. While my research concerns were shaped more extensively around the results I had anticipated from my participant observation, they certainly still held influence on the way my visual analysis took shape – also to be discussed shortly. I will finish this chapter, my conclusion, with by acknowledging the limitations of this project and discussing several different ways in which my research can be extended. I move now to a breakout discussion of the primary conclusions of my case studies.

Primary Conclusions

Case Study 1 – Immersed in *Dead Island*

In addition to enjoying my time playing *Dead Island* (2011) and gaining a better appreciation for the fan base that existed around game launch, I found two aspects of my visual analysis particularly relevant to this research. First, I went into the game expecting to encounter a great deal of sexism and racism heavily loaded onto Purna’s character. However, what I found was that each character was relatively horrid in their own way! As *Dead Island* is a survival horror game, the video game expansion of the horror film genre, this could be seen as a common trope used in those film genres. A group of ill-matched misfits are brought together, forge an alliance out of adversity, and overcome their demons (and often literal ones) by the end. But instead, the protagonists on *Dead Island* fall into the existing patterns of the way the video game industry treats their characters – a heavy reliance on stereotypes for biography and story development. Furthermore, despite what is often the case in other forms of media, like the aforementioned film genres or even television, these characters did not overcome their

personality or behavioral flaws by the end of the main story/questline. They remained largely unchanged despite surviving a zombie-infested island resort that would have had a profound impact on even the worst written and most poorly developed film or television character.

Additionally, in the spirit of classic research design, I went into this game not knowing a great deal about the playthrough or storyline. As a result, much like with my previous assumption, I expected that the character I chose, Purna, would be a singular hero. However, in each and every cutscene, it was further emphasized that all four playable character options operated as a unit, a team, that were all going to survive the game (read: movie) together, as discussed in the case study write-up. This spoke to a very interesting level of comradery that was built directly into the game, and further encouraged through the option of online play with other gamers, who had to complement existing player characters.

Finally, I have thoroughly established up to this point that I knew a great deal more about the controversy surrounding this game than I did the actual game before I played it. This is precisely why I chose to play as Purna, because I knew she and said controversy would be my primary focus during the second case study. However, I also expected that when I encountered the controversial “Gender Wars” skill on my skill tree, that something might happen... I might feel differently about the game, the gameplay might change for me, the character and NPCs may behave or speak differently. But nothing happened. I specifically built my skills up to fill that branch and be able to unlock and utilize “Gender Wars” but it didn’t in any way significantly impact my game. To reiterate, I went in with an attempt to address a few guiding research questions: What is gameplay like in *Dead Island* (2011) as Purna? What is Purna’s character, visually, like? How does Purna’s performance in *Dead Island* (2011) convey gender and race? All in all, the visual analysis portion of my dissertation was not that impactful on my ability to

address my research concerns, it was instead, impactful on my true immersion with my primary artifact. An aspect of that immersion had a great deal to do with critiquing the appearance of the characters, and filtering that through the previously discussed male gaze (Mulvey, 1992).

Theoretical influence – the male gaze. As I explained in my analysis of *Dead Island*, the two female characters, Purna and Xian Mei, were both dressed in a way that could be interpreted as sexually provocative or at the very least enticing. However, the male characters, Logan and Sam B, had much more of their skin covered (and undamaged, in the case of Xian Mei). Much like many other studies of female video game characters have demonstrated (see Beasley & Standley, 2002; Martins & Williams, 2009; Downs & Smith, 2010; Near, 2013), female characters in games are typically underdressed in comparison to their male counterparts. The best way to justify these differences is through Mulvey's (1992) articulation of the male gaze and the female body/character's to-be-looked-at qualities.

This game was created by a specific group of people at a specific company, Techland, which is based in

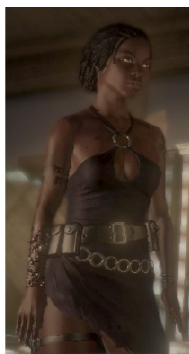


Figure 15. Purna's art composite. Her promotional art (left) as compared to her in-game imagery in the opening cinematic

Poland and was created and headed by men, with a

particular demographic in mind, which was likely male gamers. In keeping with Mulvey's (1992) articulation of the gaze, *Dead Island* was created by and for men, so the women in the game were put there

for men, as well. Their visual characteristics were arguably crafted to be pleasurable for those same men. Furthermore, the promotional art of both characters was significantly more



Figure 14. Xian Mei's art composite. Her promotional image (left) as compared to her in-game imagery in the opening cinematic scene (right).

attractive in comparison to their in-game art (see Figures 14 and 15). Gamers/fans likely spent more time looking at this art than they did the in-game art, as the cut scenes move very quickly and it's hard to get a static frame without additional software or ending the scene altogether. Nevertheless, whether more focus was spent on the beautification of the promotional art or the in-game art, the results remain the same. Both Purna and Xian Mei are portrayed with exposed skin (upper thighs, legs, and cleavage) and in less functional attire (i.e., their skirted outfits and higher-heeled footwear would likely make running and fighting zombies very difficult).

Though not specifically highlighted in my game analysis, NPCs in the game also support the presence of a male gaze in this game. There are, of course, many other women on the island of Banoi, several survivors and quite a few clearly female zombies. Although the male NPC characters come in a variety of shapes and sizes, the women are consistently thin, light-skinned, and, though in varying amounts of clothing, clearly large breasted (see Figure 16). The sexualization of the female zombies is also at the center of the *Dead Island: Riptide* zombie bait controversy discussed in this case study. While it could be argued that the reason so many of the female NPCs are in bikinis (as the vast majority of them are) because they were at an island resort, that argument doesn't quite hold up when compared with the male NPCs, who are in a much wider variety of attire (e.g., board shorts and t-shirts, uniforms, casual shorts and tops, jeans and shirts, etc.).



Figure 16. An infected female *Dead Island* NPC. The majority of female zombies were in bikinis.

Keeping my play-through and analysis of the game in mind, I proceeded to conduct my second case study. As carefully reviewed in the previous chapter, this case study focused on the more controversial aspects of the game with which I was familiar prior to playing the game. It is

in this part of my study that I address my research concerns and reconfirm some of the overlaps between this study and contemporary digital culture and online commentary research.

Case Study 2 – Wading Through Commentary

I did not enjoy conducting the research for this case study nearly as much as I did the last one. (It's probably weird that I wanted to put "haha" there). Delving into the comment sections and discussion board forums that were associated with the "Feminist Whore" controversy lived up to my expectations about intersections of gender, power, and emotionality in online commenting. In the previous chapter, I included a very detailed review of the major categories and themes that emerged as I coded this dataset, as well as an overview of my theoretical influence for that specific case study – subaltern counterpublics. It became clear through my analysis that the group of commenters in my collection of articles and discussion forums behaved as if occupying a virtual sphere (Papacharissi, 2002) to develop public discourse (Loke, 2012). I will reiterate my discussion by addressing the research concerns I proposed in the introduction of this dissertation, as well as the overlap with public sphere literature.

Addressing my research concerns: Sexist and misogynistic commentary. As elaborated in my previous chapter, the major themes I noted were: the main categories of Frozen Statements and Well-Being Emotions, and the subcategories Antagonism or Confrontation and Defensive Statements. Throughout each of these there were strong themes that played out across categories. Included here, I would say were: a focus on feminism, accusations of taking political correctness too far, and a general use of prejudicial or violent language. These results correspond with much of my preliminary analysis about the emergent themes in these types of online spaces, in response to video game articles that heavily played on gender disruptions in games or gaming communities. I was able to find significant reinforcement that sexist and/or misogynistic

comments were characteristic of these sections of video game related articles that covered the “Feminist Whore” controversies. For the purposes of my study, the comment sections were quite sexist in a lot of ways. This mainly took the form in how posters addressed their interpretation of feminist or feminism and what constitutes genuine controversy or cause for concern. As I’ve already discussed, a lot of negative emotions abounded across the categories I coded. This was precisely why Antagonism or Confrontation and Defensive Statements were so prominent – and Emotions-of-Others so vacant.

However, my articles and discussion forums focused on a topic that itself was about a sexist piece of code that had been left buried in the game. In keeping with Sood et al.’s (2012) and Ziegele et al.’s (2014) arguments about the contagious nature of emotion in comments and controversial subject matter, it’s possible that the reason this was characteristic of my dataset was because they grew out of misogynistic source material.

It’s hopeful to me that I found an overlap with previous research for the comment sections, but not necessarily the discussion forums. This would make generalizing my findings across digital platforms quite difficult. As the game changes, so does the subset of gaming culture that is attracted/attached to it. As with film or television studies, or any kind of critical media studies, generalizability isn’t possible when one doesn’t take genre into consideration. And even then, it’s going to be very difficult to generalize out how another group of gamers may handle a similar situation in a different context. Now, it could be argued that those associated with #GamerGate essentially prove that negative emotions are more likely to dominate in situations concerning the overlap of gender and power in gaming spaces. However, this was still a very different situation comparatively. This leads me to my next research concern.

Addressing my research concerns: Gamer interaction in online non-gaming settings.

What's incredibly interesting here is that I wouldn't now address this concern as if gamers are all horrible to one another – because they're not, as discussed previously. This is a very murky area in gaming culture studies, as a big concern is who gets to be considered 'in' and who gets left 'out'. But also, as with many circles of digital culture, whose voices carry the most weight and who is using them most often. With regard to interaction in non-gaming settings, this question is far too broad for this project. What I can speak to are the ways the commenters interacted with one another throughout the boards and comment sections. While there was certainly a great deal of negative emotionality in these spaces, there was also genuine conversation. The main problem that exists is what it is gamers are bonding over – and for many in my study, it was their distaste for the disembodied feminist.

While I do still maintain that gamer culture can still be defined in some way, this was not easily accomplishable within the way I conducted my case studies. How do I know in what manner culture is built and reinforced in this small subset of gaming culture? Again, much like with my discussion of playing through *Dead Island* (2011), my research concerns were formulated at the outset of the dissertation and I did not change them, even as I began to realize how out of reach they were within the scope of my project. I believe it is possible to attempt to address these concerns, but I don't believe I can do it just based on this dissertation project alone.

Overall, my project did what I wanted it to do, it took an in-depth look at the comment sections associated with one specific game and once specific controversy that involved questions of gender and power in gaming spaces. The added element of emotionality in these spaces was added based on what I had noticed in so many other places. Specifically, the three events I cited that inspired my project and, really, thrust me from gamer and feminist, to feminist gaming

scholar. However, much like Chess and Shaw (2015), identifying as a gamer, enjoying video games as much in my free time as in my scholarly pursuits, is what draws me to projects like this. Further echoed by Day's (2014) quote at the top of this chapter – the conclusion to her exposition on #GamerGate that got her doxed – I too want the culture to be better.

Addressing my theoretical influence: The digital public sphere and counterpublics.

In addition to the many ways in which I was able to study the level of sexism and frustrations about feminism in the online commentary, I was also able to see the ways the commenters interacted with one another. In the previous chapter, I focused predominantly on the major themes that came out of my analysis with regard to my research concerns. What was left out, then, was a more detailed discussion of the more innocuous commentary woven throughout the comment sections and message boards. A great deal of these were messages of simple agreement or simple disagreement. There wasn't a great deal to expound on with these posts until this particular discussion.

A way in which public discourse is developed is through slowly building a consistently supported and accepted knowledge base. What seems to have happened in my case study, is that the public discourse most commonly held by the posters is that people (mainly women and/or feminists) were blowing the "Feminist Whore" code debacle out of proportion and were ruining everyone else's fun. While a somewhat 'eye roll worthy' statement, there is a more sinister issue below the surface. Mainly, that women don't have enough credit to be believed that something is offensive or hurtful to them when it comes to this male space. And while this could still be lumped in with my previous discussions about my research concerns, I have chosen to highlight it here because this is pretty strong support for the development of a digital public sphere. The commenters to the articles I reviewed largely voiced support for anti-feminist/anti-women posts

– whether more clearly misogynist and hateful or more in line with gender microaggressions or simple opposition to political correctness in general.

Limitations

As is customary for any research, I would like to acknowledge the limitations I see to this dissertation project. I chose a specifically emotion-inducing subject. In addition to what I have already discussed in each standalone case study, I'd like to address three limitations of this dissertation that stand out to me as I'm wrapping up this experience. First, this dissertation was focused heavily on the emotional investment/involvement/engagement of gamers in various gaming spaces – including both online and offline spaces. Nevertheless, I may have let my emotional entanglement with my subject leak in too greatly throughout this project. Specifically, my primary motivation was to see how my personal view of the toxicity of comment sections held up when filtered through academic study. Second, though ultimately an extension of the previous limitation, the articles I chose for the second case study were themselves quite emotionally charged. Thus, this could have influenced the level of emotionality I saw in the comments.

Third, my primary artifact was actually quite dated (i.e., four years old) by the time I finished this project – which also contributed to my final limitation. This is one of the biggest drawbacks to doing academic work within digital culture and with digital artifacts. If the study doesn't move fast enough, the culture won't wait. I became very attached to this project idea, centered on this specific game and this specific controversy, so I didn't revise for a more contemporary artifact. I felt that this project was still extremely relevant in the face of the age of the game or lack of new activity on the boards or articles concerning it. However, this did prove

to be a rather significant obstacle when trying to collect interview participants – as no one really considered this a game on their radar anymore.

Finally, the shape of this project has changed quite a bit since I first proposed it. One of the biggest reasons for that is, simply, I bit off more than I could chew. The project I proposed, and the project I performed, was massive. My original plan was to ALSO conduct interviews and focus groups so that I could more adequately understand the involvement of players with this specific game (see Appendix D for original HSRB Consent Form). While I did drop this part of the project, it was only because of the reasons I discussed above. Even with cutting that part, I could have done my dissertation on just the play through of *Dead Island* (2011) or just the analysis of online commentary. However, I did really believe it would do this project justice to combine both. And, I maintain that I was able to accomplish this in most of the ways I set out to. I do also believe that scaling back this project from the outset, rather than throughout, would have been better for my emotional and mental wellbeing.

Out of that limitation, though, grows several different ideas I have for future directions and extensions of my dissertation work. As I stated in my previous chapter, I have a wealth of data amassed from those comment sections, I also have even more documents than the ones I ended up using. Additionally, I certainly have ideas for ways I think I could have done this project a little differently, and on a much smaller scale. I'll discuss my thoughts in the next section.

Future Directions

The primary ways in which I see extending the research in this dissertation are to continue with two of the potential chapters that I had planned as I was working. As mentioned previously, this project was originally planned to include interview and focus groups with fans of

Dead Island (2011). Now that this research has been completed, I would like to revisit attempting to conduct interviews, though I think focus groups may be reaching at this point. I would construct my interview guide based on my findings here, asking specifically about the interviewees' knowledge of the controversy. Additionally, when the interviews were clearly becoming less and less likely, I began building an autoethnographic element into a planned third case study. I don't believe enough critical gaming scholarship is conducted using autoethnography and I think a fitting extension of this project – or related ones – would benefit immensely from performing one.

As I discussed previously, I also think the case studies I did perform could be conducted more thoroughly on their own in nuanced ways. When I introduced the first case study, I said that there were many different ways in which the game could be studied. For example, because it was not a centralized focus of this dissertation, more closely examining the NPC protagonist characters and quests in *Dead Island* (2011) would certainly be beneficial to understanding the nuanced ways in which gender is performed in this game. Moreover, I spent considerable focus on Purna in my analysis, but a more detailed intersectional interrogation of each character would serve as a great way of seeing the way these gendered and raced characters really expand.

An extension of my second case study could be the addition of *Dead Island* (2011) articles and forums that don't focus on Purna. This could serve as a sort of barometer for testing the way in which a controversial article elicits comments as opposed to a more neutral article. Additionally, though with no need to anchor it to *Dead Island* (2011), a study of the different ways in which discussion forum posters and article commenters treat the same or similar topics would make for a fantastic study. In my second case study, I noticed that the forum contributors did not post as voraciously or emotionally as the article commenters. This could certainly have

been unique to my data, but given the way my participant observation pilot study went and the many parallels between my comment analysis preliminary studies and performance of method in that case study, I believe additional studies would see similar findings.

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APPENDIX A – *DEAD ISLAND* CUTSCENE CITATIONS

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APPENDIX B – SITES USED FOR ANALYSIS

Articles

(2011, September 8). Dead Island developer Techland “disturbed” by feminist whore skill.

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Crecente, B. (2011, September 8). *Dead Island* maker gives leading lady a “feminist whore” skill. *Kotaku*. Retrieved from <http://www.kotaku.com>

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Forums³⁰

(2011, September 1). *XD!!! Is this true about Purna’s rage mode? Look at what the wiki page says!* GameFAQs Xbox 360 Board.

(2011, September 8). *About Purna’s “gender wars” skill and the controversy surrounding it...* GameFAQs PC Board.

(2011, September 8). *Controversy in the game*. Deadislandforums.com

³⁰ I have elected to use the most basic form of citing online media using APA. I want to continue my dedication to refraining from identifying the commenters too specifically.

(2011, September 8). *Have we had a “feminist *****” thread yet?* GameFAQs Xbox 360 Board.

(2011, September 11). *Feminist wh0re?* GameFAQs Xbox 360 Board.

APPENDIX C – CODING FRAME

Article Association (Primary theme of response is with article association.)	Well-Being Emotions (Primary theme of response is event-based. This most often includes comments about the way posters felt about the discovery of the trait, the treatment of the exposure, the handling of the apology, etc.)	Frozen Statement (Primary theme of response is a general call to “Let it Go”, live and let live, move on with one’s life.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Agreement with</u> article, forum topic, user comment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Desirable association</u> – positive emotional reaction to events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Overall neutral association</u> with regard to comment/post or article
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fortunes-of-Others Emotions (Good-will emotions towards others. This could be an unidentified ‘other’ such as the company, other gamers, the article author, other commenters, or a social group (i.e., women and/or feminists). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fortunes-of-Others Emotions (Good-will emotions towards others. This could be an unidentified ‘other’ such as the company, other gamers, the article author, other commenters, or a social group (i.e., women and/or feminists). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Poster did not necessarily agree nor disagree with the overall comment; simply encouraged they ‘move on’ or ‘let it go’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Messages used to establish Credibility (Either of themselves, as a gamer, or of their information) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Messages used to establish Credibility (Either of themselves, as a gamer, or of their information) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Defensive Statements (Direct responses to the article or other posters in defense of oneself or implying personal offense to something that was said.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Defensive Statements (Direct responses to the article or other posters in defense of oneself or implying personal offense to something that was said.) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Disagreement with</u> article, forum topic, user comment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Undesirable association</u> – negative emotional reaction to events. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Antagonism or Confrontation (Ill-will emotions or actions toward others. This could be an unidentified ‘other’ such as the company, other gamers, the article author, other commenters, or a social group (i.e., women and/or feminists).) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Antagonism or Confrontation (Ill-will emotions or actions toward others. This could be an unidentified ‘other’ such as the company, other gamers, the article author, other commenters, or a social group (i.e., women and/or feminists).) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Messages used to establish Credibility (Either of themselves, as a gamer, or of their information) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Messages used to establish Credibility (Either of themselves, as a gamer, or of their information) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Defensive Statements (Direct responses to the article or other posters in defense of oneself or implying personal offense to something that was said.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Defensive Statements (Direct responses to the article or other posters in defense of oneself or implying personal offense to something that was said.) 	

American Culture Studies

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: “I Don't Take Kindly to Your Invasion of this Fine Gaming Culture”: The Affective Power of the Female Body in Digital Gaming Spaces

INTRODUCTION: You are invited to participate in a research study about reactions of gamers to select video games and video game-related content conducted by Nicole Reamer, from the American Culture Studies Program at Bowling Green State University. Your participation in this research will contribute to a doctoral dissertation seeking to understand the game-related reactions and interpretations of players in gaming communities. I try to understand how the players react to and interpret the games they play as well as the online content they may interact with, in order to develop best practices as part of my larger research project. You were identified as a possible volunteer in the study because you identify as a person who plays video games.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: This study seeks to add a more 'human' element to the manner in which video games have been studied previously - most research studies only look at the art of the video game itself or the way in which it is played. I hope to see how the people who play these games react to them and how they view themselves as a subculture. Furthermore, I will be exploring how self-identified game-players react to online video game-related commentary.

PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES: Potential participants will be fully informed of all procedures and activities before signing the consent form.

I will conduct focus group interviews with small groups of participants that will take about one-hour. During this focus group, I will ask you about your playing experiences and the ways in which your gaming community impacts those experiences. This conversation be open in that whatever you feel important to reveal about your perspective, you are encouraged to do so. We will conduct the focus group in an agreed upon location that allows for everyone's level of comfort and access. Focus groups may take place electronically via Google Hangout or other similar online communication tools. I will record the interviews with two audio-recording devices and one video recording device (the video-recording will only be used for electronic interviews conducted through Skype or other similar online communication tools). These interviews will only be listened to and viewed by me and will remain locked in my residence to maintain your confidentiality. After I transcribe the recordings and complete the analysis, they will be erased to further ensure confidentiality.

You will also be asked to grant permission to allow me to interview you one-on-one as a follow-up to the focus group interview. These follow-up interviews will take no more than one hour; thus, full participation in the entire study could take up to two hours. The context of the one-on-one interview is up to you – it may be in an electronic interview conducted through text chat or e-mail, or face-to-face in a physical location. The interview will be based on my transcription and observations during the focus group. I may ask you to repeat your responses to previously asked questions or ask for additional information based on what you've already discussed in the focus group. If you are not comfortable with this component of the study, you are free to only participate in the focus group.

After I have gathered my data and have made my analysis of the study, I will share the transcript of our interview, field notes, and summary with you so that you can correct, clarify, or delete parts of it as you see fit. This will be done before the work goes into publication. I want *your* story and I want to understand it correctly.

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There are no direct monetary incentives associated with this study. However, the participant will be contributing to a greater understanding of how gamers react to the games that they play, as well as the way in which they interact in online spaces, maintain social ties, and the roles that those social bonds play in fostering group identity.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS: Risk of participation is not greater than that experienced in daily life.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY: You will benefit from this study by being able to voice your opinion of what it means to be a gamer, play specific video games, and engage with online game-related content. Too often, the voices that have been missing the most from this cultural conversation are the ones who actually play these games and have a vested interest in these environments. Because of this, I want to know how your own gaming and online experiences have shaped the way that you participate in the gaming community at large. This study will be a great way to get your voice out there and understood.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your name, screen names, social media or gaming handles and any other personally identifiable information will be changed so that you may remain anonymous throughout the research report. All audio-recordings, transcriptions of those recordings, field notes, and transcriptions of the field notes will be locked in a secure filing cabinet at my personal residence and any digital files will remain on a password-protected computer only accessible to me. All digital files will be erased at the completion of the study. The physical transcripts will be kept with the researcher in a locked, secure filing cabinet after the study, encrypted under a coding scheme which will not reveal your identity or link you in any personal way to the original information.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions (or not do a particular task) or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you decide to participate or not, it will have no affect on your relationship with Bowling Green State University or with me as an employee of the University. Similarly, if you are a student in a class I am teaching, your relationship with me or your grades will not be impacted, as participation in the study will take place after the semester has been completed and final grades have been submitted. Risks associated with sharing your stories with me are no greater than those encountered in daily life. However, if you should feel there is any form of risk – you are free to decline participation. Furthermore, your decision to participate or not participate will not have any impact with your gaming community—your identity will remain confidential even to other community members within your community. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. If you volunteer to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS AND REVIEW BOARD: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact: Nicole Reamer at nreamer@bgsu.edu (419) 372-8886 or Radhika Gajjala (faculty sponsor) at radhik@bgsu.edu, (419) 372-0586. If you have other concerns or questions regarding participant rights, contact the chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University at (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

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I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research. If I am signing this form electronically, my consent to participate in the study will be indicated by my access and submission of this consent form through the Qualtrics site for this study.

Participant Signature

Date